nolite te bastardes carborundorum

by SaintHeretical

Summary

Born on the fringes of a dystopian dictatorship, Rey has lived most of her life in the shadows until desperation drives her into the hands of the government. Her unblemished womb is her only salvation, which leads to her being placed as a Handmaid in the household of Commander Kylo Ren and his infertile wife.

Her task? Produce a healthy child for the Commander, or be banished to a life of hardship and almost certain death.

A Reylo Handmaid’s Tale AU
“Spread your legs.”

The doctor’s fingers are freezing, icicles clothed in a thin latex barrier. Wincing, Rey clenches her thighs tightly together, even as the bright clinic lights glare down on her shaking body.

A sigh. “There are four Guardians standing by. They are trained in restraint, but I cannot guarantee their gentleness. Will you comply, or shall I call them over?”

She flinches; a memory of gripping hands, harsh shouts, and flashes of green sends tendrils of ice through her veins. A deep breath. She bites back her anger until it’s a copper smear on her tongue then, inch by inch, her trembling legs ease open until she’s fully exposed to the chilly air and the doctor’s clinical stare.

More latex, this time clothing a clear rod, prods at her entrance. It’s coated in a thick layer of cold gel that only barely eases the device’s path into her most private area.

“So far so good,” the doctor dictates to a gowned assistant. Rey hears the clacking of Compudoc keys, but can’t identify the typist. “The uterus is unmarred with a typical endometrium. The ovaries are clean- no cysts, no scarring. Of a typical size and shape.”

The assistant gives a small hum.

Rey no longer feels the cold, she is the cold, from the oppressive chill of the white walled room to the sterile instrument probing her depths. It’s impersonal, unfeeling, and far from what she’d imagined penetration to be like. She feels stretched open and exposed, yet strangely detached from the situation, despite being strapped to the bed like some sort of deranged animal.

There’s several prods on her abdomen. “I detect no abnormalities or lesions. The patient has no birth record forthcoming, however I estimate her age to be around eighteen years old.”

“Nineteen.” Endless scratches on a concrete wall. Her voice sounds harsh and raspy. “I’m nineteen years old.”

A pause. “Nineteen years it is. Blood tests show no disease or infection. On a heavy regimen of supplements, any signs of malnutrition should cease within the month.”

Abruptly, the instrument is removed from Rey’s body, leaving her empty and sticky. With a final prod, the doctor nods and peels off his gloves, along with the latex tube covering the probe, and disposes them in a forest green bin next to his desk. He looks over at his assistant. “Send in Aunt Jael.”

Rey hears the door squeak open, and stares up at the ceiling, eyes watering. She doesn’t want to give in, but she also hates feeling so lost and vulnerable, hates the way her mind keeps jumping to conclusions that aren’t even possible.

It was stupidity that got her caught, plain and simple, stupidity and desperation. Over fourteen years she’s been skirting the edge of society in Gilead, scrounging the crumbs and scraps that fall between the cracks of any civilization, and she’s never been caught. Had never been caught.

But every night she grew hungrier and hungrier. There became less waste, less cracks, more ‘efficiencies’ and ‘streamlined processes’ that left her stomach gnawing on itself and her nails and
hair cracked and brittle. She knew the Eyes were always watching, just waiting for the right moment to pounce, but her dignity was all that she had left and, like everything else, it had a price.

Her bitten lips and pinched cheeks had barely made it out of the shadows before one of them slunk up next to her from wherever he had been lurking. *What brings you here?* he had hissed, his badge barely hidden under his uniform.

*You know what brings me here.*

Her face burns at the memory, and her hands clench against the examination table. The doctor, still looming above her, notices her fury and chuckles. “You look like a handful, young one. Still think you can fight your way out of this? Don’t delude yourself. Even if you got past the Guardians outside, and fought your way through the Aunts that roam the halls, the Eyes would still be watching your every step. Your days as a shadow are long gone. You belong to Gilead now.”

Another person soundlessly appears on the right side of the bed. It’s an older woman, clothed in a tailored brown gown that matches Rey’s hair. Her face is only barely lined, but her eyes are sharp and weathered.

“Aunt Jael,” the doctor murmurs. “I’ve finished the examination.”

She raises an eyebrow. “And?”

“And-” He pauses for effect. Rey can tell, from the slight quirk at the corner of his mouth, that he enjoys teasing the stoic Aunt. “-she is as young and healthy as she appears. A perfect candidate.”

“I see.” Aunt Jael’s eyes linger on the restraints around Rey’s wrists. “Perfect, you say?”

“Physically, that is. I’m sure, with some *education* she will prove to be a well *rounded* addition to your growing brood.”

“Excellent.” The older woman’s eyes rake over Rey’s body, over her thin legs, narrow hips, and flat abdomen before flicking up to her face. “Do you know the crimes you have been charged with, my girl?”

A flash of shame clenches at Rey’s stomach. “I-I didn’t have any food, I had to-”

“No excuses!” Aunt Jael’s voice cracks through the clinic. “Selling your body is a crime against us all. You have been given a great gift, and you chose to cast that gift onto the dirt.”

“But I was-”

Long, craggy nails dig into the muscle of her thigh, and she winces.

“What did I say?”

“No excuses,” Rey breathes.

She stares up at the speckled white ceiling. The ebbs of light catch in its various pits and pockmarks creating endless shades of grey. It’s the last thing she sees before she feels a prick in her arm, and everything fades to black.

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She wakes in a dingy room crowded with row and rows of thin cots. The air is artificially chilled, and the lights above her are bright and buzzing. Though long abandoned of its previous use, the faint
scent of cloying cologne still permeates the space, emanating from the stark painted walls and dingy linoleum.

She’s surrounded by other women, also waking from sleep, albeit theirs seems natural and not drugged. They stretch and scratch at themselves unselfconsciously, with an ease that belies the unspoken community forged amongst fellow captives.

Groaning, she rubs at her eyes, then winces. Her ankle burns and, when she raises the plain white nightshirt she woke in, she finds a fresh tattoo etched into the raw skin above her foot.

2187, followed by a single eye. Though simple, the sketched pupil follows her gaze when she tries to look away. The ebony ink contrasts with the scrubbed-clean paleness of her skin. She shivers. The Eye is always watching.

Her stomach clenches. She’s seen it before, something like it. She’s seen it before, and when she glances down at the end of her modest bed and sees a mass of red, her suspicions are confirmed. Instinctively, her hands go down to her abdomen, cradling her apparently unscarred, fertile womb.

This is her life now.

* *

Silence permeates the building, despite the hordes of women that call it home. Rey soon learns that life at the re-education centre is a quiet one; the only ones who converse with regularity are the brown-robed Aunts, each armed with a long, electric cattle prod used to silence any dissenters. Rey has only felt the sting of it once, and it was enough to make her wish that she had never learned to speak.

There are times when the Aunts allow speech, and it proves to be even worse than silence, for Testifying is meant to sow seeds of discord, not camaraderie. Rows of sticky plastic chairs transform one of the glass walled rooms into a makeshift classroom; each chair filled by an identical red-robed spectre. Every day they take turns, standing and recounting their stories under the derisive stares of their peers.

Her first time was the worst. Rey, under the glare of Aunt Jael, recounted her tale of hunger and desperation, of undocumented existence and homelessness, of a life so bleak it inevitably led her to advertise her flesh on the street, thin and malnourished as she was. Fortunately, her first prospective client had been an Eye who, aided by a band of Guardians, had dragged her kicking and screaming into the re-education facility’s clinic.

“God truly is gracious,” Aunt Jael had proclaimed. “He saved you from your own stupidity and ungratefulness.”

Rey’s face burned. “I suppose so.”

“We know it to be true. What would have happened had you been successful in your venture? Why, you would have destroyed this perfect gift that he’s given your countrymen! Such a stupid decision!”

Aunt Jael’s judgement echoed on the lips of the other women. Yes, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid…

“Failed, failed, failed, failed…”

“Selling yourself like a common whore.”
Every day, it’s another story. She soon learns that all of the other women at the centre have been accused of similar crimes, whether it’s prostitution, frigidity, lesbianism, or a myriad of others. Every day she sits in a hardback chair under flickering fluorescent lights and listens to their shame, listens as they tearfully recount their pain, only to have it thrown back into their faces by the Aunts and their droning choir.

Her other least favourite activities are those of a more sexual nature. Sexual is probably not the best term for it, but Rey isn’t quite sure what else to call the mandatory pornography viewing sessions, punctuated by the Aunts’ harsh critiques of the ‘old ways.’

“You would all be animals to them,” Aunt Hannah cries out over the grunting and slapping emanating from the screen. “But to Gilead, you are gifts.”

More awkward still are the role playing rehearsals of the Ceremony. She finds herself between the legs of another nameless woman, her head resting on her belly while her eyes face skyward. Fingers intertwined, they lay together, shivering, as another Aunt describes the act of reproduction in lurid detail, punctuated only by reverently delivered scraps of scripture.

“Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel: and he said, ‘Am I in God’s stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?’”

Rey stares up at the ceiling and imagines someone on top of her, a man with strong shoulders and kind eyes. He reaches down and brushes her hair, which is loose and flowing, away from her face before bending over to kiss her softly. Tears well up in her eyes and are blinked away, but not before her partner gives her hand a reassuring squeeze.

It’s not all bad. The food is delicious and plentiful, and there’s definitely time for napping and other leisurely activities. Under the watchful eyes of the Aunts, Rey fills out, her cheeks get rounder and her muscles become supple. She begins to menstruate again, which triggers an anxiety attack so bad, she ends up being dragged from the bathroom by her armpits and sedated for a day, but it’s still truly something positive. After years of scrounging and scraping, she feels her body finally starting to wake up and live.

And at night, when the Aunts are prowling the spacious corridors, the whispers of lost memories drift through the air like perfume on the wind. Names of places, of children, of selves long suppressed but never forgotten pass from lips to muttering lips. They wrap around her, blanketing her against the sterile loneliness of life, reminding her that, while the life outside is under the charge of the Aunts, no one can truly own them in the night.

She’s there for a month before she adds herself to the chant. Heart pounding, she breathes it into the silence and waits several throbbing minutes until the person next to her takes in a breath and pierces the darkness.

Rey. Rey, Rey, Rey. Alice, Diane, Memphis, Chicago, Kristy, Paige, Jana, Drayton, Carson, Rey.

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“It’s time for you to leave us.”

It’s been barely more than two months, but she knows that even mentioning that fact would find her at the wrong end of Aunt Jael’s cattle prod. Instead, she nods slowly, lowering her spoon from her mouth as she swallows her final mouthful of cream streaked porridge.
The women surrounding her at the table, her sisters in bondage, exchange looks of curiosity and fear.

Aunt Hannah approximates a smile. “Your first assignment is to a household headed by a young Commander just returning from deployment. He and his Wife have been married for four years, which have not been fruitful. You will be with them for two years. Should you succeed with this assignment, you shall officially be deemed Fertile, and will never have to worry again about being sent away to the Colonies.”

From her lips, it sounds exciting and clinical, however Rey is all too aware of the realities of the situation. Her body throbs at the thought of intrusion; first the act of intercourse itself, meant to seed her fertile womb, and then the idea of a baby, his baby, growing inside her. Some nameless, faceless Commander would be her only hope of surviving. The thought of it makes her sick.

“I see,” she says. “And if I do not get pregnant in that time?”

Aunt Jael’s eyes flash. “If God chooses to not bless you on your first assignment, you will have two additional opportunities to serve a family. If there are no fruit from those opportunities, there will be no place for you here.”

“We have given you the tools to serve,” Aunt Hannah cautions. “But it’s up to you to be willing and earnest in your service.”

Rey stares down at her abandoned breakfast. The rich cream and oats, usually so welcome, churn in her stomach. She has to swallow hard to keep them from crawling up her throat.

Her footsteps are heavy against the tiled floor as she follows the Aunts into their front office. She’s never been here before; it’s normally reserved for paperwork and other administrative tasks the women are not privy to. There’s a dusty grey chair in front of a pristine white desk that Aunt Hannah gestures to before sitting down at the white office chair across from it.

Trembling, Rey eases herself into the grey chair, which creaks under her weight. The room is deathly quiet, save for the rustle of paper and the clack clacking of mechanical buttons being pressed. Gone are the muffled murmurs, rustling fabrics, and shuffling footsteps of her life in community over the past month. Here she feels exposed, like a red smear against the snow white walls.

Aunt Hannah’s fingers fly on the keys of the Compudoc in front of her, her brow furrowed in concentration. “Has the driver been called, Aunt Jael?”

The other Aunt looks up from the stack of papers she’s skimming. “Yes, the house Martha dispatched him ten minutes ago. He should be here in five.”

Aunt Hannah nods. “Excellent.”

“Where am I going?” Rey blurts out, before she can stop herself. She winces, instinctively, waiting for a white hot prod that never comes. Instead Aunt Hannah gives her a smile that could almost be interpreted as kind.

“You’re going to be staying at a house about eleven miles away from this facility.”

“But still in the city?”

“Yes.”

Rey lets out a sigh of relief. Truly, she has no real attachment to anything specific about the location, however the knowledge that she will not be required to travel is balm enough for her twitching
nerves. She’ll still be here, only a couple miles away from the place she’s called home for most of her life, which means-

“I will caution you that any attempt to escape your new living situation will be met with the utmost discipline and restraint.”

She notices Aunt Jael’s stare from behind her paperwork, watching for her response. “I understand. However, I assure you that there is nothing for me to return to.”

A younger Aunt pokes her head into the office space. “The driver has arrived.”

Rey’s eyes go wide. “Does that mean I’m leaving now, right away? Can I not say-?”

“Thank you,” Aunt Hannah interrupts. The other woman gives a quick smile and leaves.

Grabbing a chair, Aunt Jael sits down next to Aunt Hannah and pushes the paper file across the desk. “This is for you. Rey.”

Rey bristles at the sound of her name on the Aunt’s lips. It sounds wrong, vulgar, almost spat like a curse word or an embarrassing afterthought. For the entire time she’s been at the facility, she’s only heard her name whispered back to her after hours, never in the light of day. Hearing it now, said with such disdain, fills her with trepidation.

“This file contains all of the relevant information for your new assignment. There’s a brief family history, basic maps of the house and neighbourhood, familial connections…”

She flips open the cardstock file with shaking fingers, revealing a crisp, freshly printed page. The first is of a map, basic being a generous way to describe it, as it outlines the main house, along with the houses of several neighbours, and several amenities, outlining a total of five blocks. She turns the page, but there’s no expansion of range, only a list of names accompanied by exceptionally blurry photographs.

“As you know, once your assignment starts, you will officially become part of this household. This is not like being a Martha though, as you will not be expected to perform housekeeping duties. You will be taking a respected and crucial role in this house, and as such there are certain changes that must happen. Certain tasks that you must do and mantles that you need to take on. After all, this is what we have prepared you for.”

Weeks of roleplaying and lessons and testifying flash before her eyes even as she skims the text in front of her for the one thing, the crucial thing, that will change, the last part of herself that she’s held onto for all of these years of hardship and struggle. Finally, she sees it:

COMMANDER: REN, Kylo

She looks up at the Aunts, who are staring at her expectantly, but she won’t break. She can’t break. Instead, she forces out a painful smile.

Aunt Hannah smiles back. “That’s the spirit. You’ve been given a blessed task- the highest calling for a woman. We’ve done our best to equip you with everything you need to succeed.”

“Now all you need to do is commit, and give your all.” Aunt Jael pats her shoulder in a rare sign of affection. “Go with God...Ofren.”
The house is a massive old mansion, complete with a large wrap around deck, intricate wooden detailing, and a tall peaked turret. The exterior is white, freshly painted by the looks of it, trimmed with shiny dark walnut that gleams in the sunlight. She’s never seen such a beautiful building up close before. Her fingers itch to touch the smooth sanded floorboards and run through the plush green lawn.

The driver, Poe, according to his short introduction at the Red Centre, skillfully guides the car up the cobblestone driveway and parks it in front of a large garage. He seems kind enough; throughout their short trip he was silent but still seemed alert and engaged, and wasn’t outwardly resentful of the cargo he was tasked to transport.

All that said, he could be an Eye. The one she’d seen, albeit briefly, had also been courteous, bright, and well-kempt, at least before they revealed themselves. There had always been a light behind their eyes, as if the secrets they held within somehow lit a fire in their gaze. Poe definitely has that fire.

Like a gentleman from a bygone era, he steps out of the car then turns to open her door, nodding politely. She nods back, but not enough to expose any more of her face, which is neatly blocked by twin wings of white.

Poe leads the way up a stone lined path through the grass. The yard is fairly spartan, as is typical for the neighbourhood, however the Government has seen fit to preserve a singular fruit tree with pink blossoms that’s situated right next to the front porch. The gnarling and pockmarked trunk signifies its advanced age and the stories it’s witnessed. She wonders how many women the tree has seen, women dressed in red just like her.

The door opens, revealing an absolutely stunning woman. She’s tall, at least over six feet, with piercing blue eyes and long, blonde curls gathered into a neat bun at the nape of her neck. She’s wearing a sky blue dress that skims her ankles along with a matching blue ribbon tied into a jaunty bow around her head. She looks like one of the women Rey’s seen on the crumpled old advertisements for laundry soap that used to line the shacks she’d stay in, except those women were always smiling. This woman’s pink lips are fused in a thin line.

“Poe.” She nods to the driver. He nods back. Unblinking, her bright blue eyes focus on Rey. “Ofren.”

Rey nods in acknowledgement. The name is still foreign to her ears, having only been given to her a scant fifteen minutes ago. “Ms. Phasma.”

“Please, call me-” The other woman pauses, then wrinkles her nose. “How-? Never mind. I would rather you didn’t call me anything.”

“Excuse me?”

Phasma’s lips go even thinner. “You heard me. Your purpose in this household is solely utilitarian. I won’t pretend that you’re anything more than an incubator.”

Poe shifts, but says nothing.

She doesn’t know where to look; Phasma’s stare has gone even chillier than it was initially. She knows the other woman’s reaction is well within the realm of normal, even the Aunts mentioned it may be the case, but it’s still off-putting to have such poison thrown into her face so explicitly. She
wants to frown, wants to scream at Phasma that she too doesn’t want to be here, that she would rather be scrounging in a ditch than serving herself up, scrubbed and gowned, to an ungrateful mistress.

But instead she just drops her head in deference, her face neutral and impassive.

They stand there for a couple of long, awkward moments before Phasma sighs and gestures to the hallway with a long, graceful arm. “Alright already, come inside before all the neighbours start to talk.”

The inside of the house is even more magnificent than its exterior. The floor is all dark wood, seasoned with the richness of age and framed by magnificent white wainscoting, topped with pale grey wallpaper and thick crown moulding. There’s a sweeping staircase bisecting the entryway which no doubt leads to an equally grand master bedroom suite and family rooms. To the left, beyond a pair of wood french doors, there’s a carpeted parlour with a stone fireplace, and the right houses a grand dining room.

“Poe will be leaving us, so don’t get too attached to him,” she announces, a small smirk in the corner of her mouth, as if the emotional attachments of a mere handmaid were the drollest of amusements to a woman like her. “He’s been promoted to Angel. His replacement arrived a few days ago, and should take over fully once trained.”

“I have full confidence in Finn, m’am.”

“Yes, you’ve said that, but he doesn’t look as competent as you, that’s all. But I suppose that can’t be helped. Desperate times, and all.”

“I suppose not.”

Phasma leads her past the china cabinet and dining set into a bustling kitchen. There’s two women dressed in green, the house Marthas no doubt, busy chopping vegetables next to a pot of steaming water. Upon the arrival of their mistress, they drop their knives on the counter and stand straight, eyes facing ahead.

“Maz, Harter, this is Ofren,” Phasma steps aside and points to her, as if displaying a prized pig. “She will be staying with us for as long as her presence is necessary.”

The taller of the two simply nods, her straight greying-black bangs rustling against her forehead, while the shorter one dares to scowl outright, but says nothing. Both of them, dressed in their matching dull green dresses and kerchiefs, wear their defiance like a Jezebel wears her rouge, smeared across their faces while their posture remains submissive.

They all stand there for a few awkward seconds, until Phasma announces “As you were,” and turns to exit the kitchen. Rey notes that the Marthas don’t physically relax until their mistress is out of sight.

The modest wooden door to the right of the refrigerator leads to a long, thin hallway with bare plastered walls. Lined against the wall are equally plain unmarked doors. One is cracked open, and Rey catches a glimpse of a spartan bedroom set before Phasma eases it closed.

“Poe,” she announces, letting her voice trail off with some unsaid command. The driver nods, then turns and walks back to the kitchen. Satisfied, she walks Rey down to the last door on the left side of the hall, and opens it to reveal a narrow, steep staircase.

“The women sleep upstairs,” she curtly explains. “Your room is the first door on the right. It should
be stocked with everything you need, and if you find yourself wanting, let one of the Marthas know. Breakfast will be brought up to you at 700 hours, and you will be expected to do your errands at 900 hours.”

She pauses. Her nostrils flare and, when she resumes, her voice is slightly higher. “I do not expect you to stay locked up in your room all day. That is probably what you were taught back at the Centre, but these days it’s more fashionable for your kind to, to- mingle with the Marthas. Apparently it lowers stress, raises the chances of—Another pause. “—within reason, of course. It’s not like you’ll be having dinner with the Commander and I every night, however I see no reason for you to be cooped up while we’re conducting business throughout the day.”

Rey’s brain spins with the added implications. Aunt Hannah had drilled into all of the ladies that their function in the household was to be a vessel, and even Phasma’s initial greeting had prepared her for a years of being locked away in an attic room like a piece of antiquated furniture. She almost feels hopeful, until she remembers the Marthas’ shifty looks and Poe’s bright gaze.

This could be a test. Just providing more and more opportunities to be caught, and to be punished.

She nods at Phasma, then starts her ascension up the staircase. Her mistress and jailer does not follow, affording her a sliver of privacy at least.

“Oh, Ofren?”

She pauses.

“The Commander has been delayed on his way back from the front, but he’ll be home in the next day or two.” The tone of her voice is calm, casual, as if she’s merely commenting on the weather. “You’ll meet him eventually.”

Rey’s blood runs cold. She steadies herself on the handrail as her legs threaten to give out from under her. A respite of a day or two is nothing compared to potentially two years of violation.

Despite the meager furnishings, her room is surprisingly cosy, considering what she’s used to. Humming softly to herself, she examines the bed, with its starched cotton sheets and faded quilt, along with the single pillow, slightly squished but still soft. At the foot of the bed is an old steamer trunk containing a couple of extra blankets for the winter. There’s a window next to the bed, the glass covered by an intricate metal grille that’s barely rusting at the edges, which gives her a view of the tree-lined street and almost identical houses.

Sighing, she slumps down onto the squeaky, protesting bed. She rubs her belly a few times, though not out of hunger or nausea. No, it’s more visceral than that, as if her body is preparing itself for the visceral intrusion she’s going to experience in exchange for these modest comforts. Her physical dignity for the privilege of sleeping in a bed instead of on the ground, and the occupancy of her womb for the pleasure of eating food that’s not rotting.

It seems like madness, yet here she sits, idle.

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The sun is blistering, heating the pavement to an almost unbearable temperature under her bare feet. She’s not wearing any shoes...why doesn’t she have any shoes? It’s so hot, and there’s tiny bits of gravel littering the ground. They dig into her toes and she stumbles, but doesn’t fall.

The woman’s clammy hand grips hers, the sweat making it difficult to hold on tightly. “Just keep running,” the woman pants. “We’ll be there soon, I promise.”
Her legs are too small to keep up with the woman’s longer ones, so she stops and cries out, “I can’t! I’m too tired!”

She’s caught up in the sensation of being swept up and carried, of bouncing in the arms of the woman as she runs down the path. She’s small for her age, but not weightless, and the woman begins to slow down and her breaths become gasping and laboured.

There’s a shout not too far behind them, and the sound of scuffling feet. The woman looks around wildly as she continues to force her screaming muscles past the edge of exertion.

“There,” she huffs. “Do you see the hole in that wall, sweetie?”

She follows the woman’s gaze and sees the crack, barely large enough for a small dog to get through. “Yes, I see it.”

“Good.” Wincing, the woman places her back on the ground. “I need you to run to that hole and hide. I know it looks small, but you look like you’d be good at fitting into tight spots. Am I right?”

She nods.

The woman nods back. There’s tears forming in the corners of her eyes. “Then go, my dearest. I promise, I’ll come back for you sweetheart. Never forget that.”

The hole leads to a gap in between two walls that’s half full of wood shavings. She scrunches herself against the furthest corner and waits for a scream.

It never comes.

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Now that she’s in the neighbourhood, she’s startled to discover that she’s completely lost her bearings. Gone are the days of exploring the urban topography of city, now she must sit and wait in her whitewashed cage, slowly going mad with an excess of time and energy and, once she’s actually permitted to leave the house, all she has to guide her are a couple of poorly drawn maps that look as though they were designed to instruct tiny children.

“Where are the street signs?” she murmurs to herself, frustrated. Each building is labeled with either a picture or symbol to denote its purpose, she assumes, with a large black ‘x’ on the house she now inhabits.

There’s an inkling feeling at the back of her mind, a feeling of unease that she’s had ever since she heard about her assignment. Holding her breath, she flips past the useless maps in her folder until she reaches the chart of names and personal information, topped with black and white photos of faces too blurred to really decipher.

She’s not supposed to have this. She knows she’s not, because women in the Republic of Gilead haven’t been allowed to read in over forty years, women who aren’t Aunts, that is. It’s illegal, yet the Aunts handed her the folder with calm stares on their faces and watched as she read the name of her captor to herself, as she recognized the characters that were supposed to be foreign to her.

Maybe they were testing her? Maybe they’ve been tasked to weed out radicals: women who can read, or who love other women, or worship their own god, or who mutilate their bodies with secret symbols or jewelry. Maybe it was truly a mistake, and they didn’t know she would be able to understand this powerful, forbidden information.
The only thing she’s sure of is that she can’t just sit and wait to figure out what’s going on. Sure, it could be a trap, but compared to what’s waiting for her if she just sits in her room, she’s not convinced that the Colonies would be much worse.

The Marthas are the most obvious weak point. They’re both older, which means they remember the time before, before reading was relegated to men, aunts, and scavengers with access to decaying movie cassettes and books long forgotten.

Who to trust, who to trust? Before it had been easy; they had all been No One on the fringes of society, poor and free. Now she’s been categorized and placed in a box, taught to trust everyone and nobody in the same breath. Her purpose is to incubate, and nothing else.

She crumples the page of names slightly in her hand. “I would rather die,” she breathes.

The kitchen smells of bread and warm butter when she enters, folder in hand. The Marthas look up at her and nod as one before turning back to chopping vegetables for the evening meal. Rey places her folder down on the counter and asks, “May I help?”

Maz chuckles lightly, shaking her head. “Of course not, dear. You’re not an Econowife, you don’t have to help out with the cooking as well.”

“I know I don’t have to, I just-”

“This is all strange to you.” Harter nods. “I understand that. But please also understand that it’s our job to make life easy for you, to ensure that you’re healthy and stress free, all things considered.”

The two women share a small look. Rey’s heart thumps in her chest as she slowly pulls her folder towards herself and opens it. “That’s wonderful, thank you. Actually, I did have a question about the neighbourhood. These maps aren’t very helpful at all, and I would hate to get lost.”

Harter smiles. “That shouldn’t be a problem. You’re going to have a partner that-”

“What’s this?”

Maz points to the sheet at the top of the file, the one with the blurry photos and names of the household members, still crumpled from Rey’s hand.

“Oh that doesn’t have any actual information about the neighbourhood on it. It was just in this file I was given when I-” Rey freezes. Both women are staring at her, wearing identical shocked expressions. Quickly, she backtracks. “-at the Red centre. The Aunts gave me this file to read before I got here. I didn’t steal it, I swear.”

“Could it be that they’re getting this sloppy?” Maz breathes. She reaches for the file, then hesitates. The broken sincerity in her eyes is unmistakable. “May I?”

Rey nods and slides the folder across the counter top. As one, both Marthas look around the deserted kitchen as if searching for Eyes hidden behind the pots and pans before they allow themselves to look down at the papers.

Harter lets out a satisfied sigh. “Oh Maz,” she murmurs. “It’s been so long.”

Rey frowns. “So long?”

“Since we’ve been able to read something,” Maz explains, her eyes transfixed. “That is, something other than the words I trace in the flour when I bake bread every morning.”
“Sometimes I write my name on the mirror after I have a shower,” Harter admits. “Just to make sure I still remember it. It’s so beautiful, it hurts to wipe it away. But here it is now, in ink.” *Kalonia, Harter.*” She smiles, sadly. “I was just twenty-two years old when they outlawed reading for women. I had just finished my pre-med degree, on my way to being a doctor. It’s been so long...”

“I wasn’t half as distinguished as my partner here,” Maz jokes. “But still, being a bartender who wasn’t allowed to read or serve alcohol did make my job prospects quite thin.”

“At least while you were allowed to hold a job,” Harter jokes.

*Oh.* “I suppose it’s easier for those of us who have been born after and who never learned to read, at least not officially. I’m probably not as good as either of you, but there was a benefit to growing up in a garbage dump, essentially. I found burnt copies of *Moby Dick,* *The Hobbit,* and lots of other old books,” Rey admits. “It must have been so strange to grow up with something and then have it taken away like that.”

“I suppose it was.”

Rey looks back down at the file, at the blurry images and list of names and birthdates. Even though they seem to have fostered trust with her housemates, the sight of them still makes her extremely nervous.

“Oh-” Harter runs her finger down the list and makes a *tsk-* ing noise between her teeth.

Rey leans over, but the text is just out of sight. “What is it?”

“Nothing.”

Maz frowns and glances at the sheet, then rolls her eyes. “Just spit it out.”

“But Ofren probably doesn’t want to talk about-”

“Talk about what?” Rey’s eyes are alight with curiosity.

The older woman looks over at Maz, who shrugs. “It’s all out there for her to see, Harter. She’ll find out eventually. In this house, even the walls talk.”

“Well then.” She slides the file back over to Rey, and points. “They’ve listed Commander Snoke and his wife as Kylo’s parents.”

“Well, of course they have.” Maz shakes her head. “It is the official record, after all.”

“But they’re not?” Rey asks. It was common enough thirty years ago for children to be re-homed to a Commander’s family, but the way the two women are looking at each other conspiratorially means there must be something more.

Maz pauses, eyes darting back and forth.

“Just spit it out, Maz, for goodness sake,” Harter groans. “If they truly have this room bugged, we would’ve been dragged away years ago for some of the things we’ve said.”

Maz purses her lips, and Harter rolls her eyes. “I know you want to. And look at her, does she honestly look like an Eye to you? Does she look like a true believer?” She turns to Rey. “I mean that as a compliment.”

Maz sighs. Hoisting herself up onto the stool next to the counter, she beckons Rey closer with a
curled finger. Harter gathers in as well.

“So,” Maz starts, her voice even more raspy than usual. “What do you know about Mayday?”

_Mayday._

“I’ve heard a bit about it,” Rey breathes. “To be honest, that’s all anyone in the underground talks about. Almost everyone I met growing up claimed to have a connection. They would promise that if I just gave them money or food or... other things, they could find me a spot on a van headed North.”

“Did you believe them?”

“When I was younger I did. But as I got older, I realised that men will say almost anything to get a young girl alone and in their debt, and then I stayed away. Sometimes, I wonder whether I should’ve given it a chance, just in case.”

“Nah.” Maz wrinkles her nose. “Take it from someone who knows: those seats can’t be bought. Though now-” She gestures her wrinkled fingers towards Rey’s scarlet gown, “-I bet Mayday already has one seat set aside with your name on it.”


“Who are Luke an-?”

“But I can’t talk about Luke and Leia without talking about Anakin,” Maz counters. “Then she wouldn’t be getting the full picture.”

“Anakin?” Rey perks up. “I’ve heard that name-”

“She knows who Anakin is, Maz, it was all over the news for months!”

“She knows his name, but she doesn’t know the whole story!”

“She doesn’t need to know the whole story! We’ll be here for months, the way you tell them.”

“Fine.” She turns to Rey. “So, you know about Anakin and Mayday.”

“I know that he was one of the original leaders of the Sons of Jacob, until they killed him.” It had been plastered over posters, wordless and stark, just a black uniformed body with his head covered by a bloodstained sack. “Word was that he leaked government secrets to Mayday.”

“He caused so much destruction,” Harter muses. “I suppose he just wanted to make it right before the end.”

“Anakin had children,” Maz explains. “Two of them, Luke and Leia. Naturally born and conceived twins too, very rare but not impossible at that time. Of course, when his wife died, he was pulled back to the front and the twins were re-homed. He only reconnected with them right before he died.”

“The twins were both members of Mayday.” Even in the comfort of the kitchen, Harter barely breathes the forbidden word. “They turned him right before the end, though the government didn’t know it at the time. They only found out around ten years later, after Leia-”

The slamming of the front door jolts the three women back into the present. Instantly, they fly apart, Maz and Harter returning to their cooking while Rey stuffs the folder down the front of her gown and darts into the back hallway.
She can hear Phasma’s deep voice along with Poe’s and one belonging to another man. Her stomach clenches momentarily until she remembers Finn, the new Guardian assigned to the house. Peeking around the doorframe confirms her suspicions; Phasma and Poe are discussing something animatedly while the other green-uniformed man surveys the kitchen. His gaze locks on hers for a moment, and he smiles kindly, eyes bright.

Even though she knows better, it takes all of her willpower to not smile back.
Night

Chapter Notes

Just in case it's not readily apparent, this is not a retelling of The Handmaid's Tale. Instead, it's set within the same universe, approximately 40-ish years from the time of the novel.

Her first taste of freedom comes the next morning. After a breakfast of preserved fruit and toast, Maz meets her outside of her bedroom door with a handful of tokens, a pass, and instructions.

“The Wife thinks you’re ready to run errands for the household. Ofhux will meet you outside and lead you to the shopping centre, just in case you have trouble with that extremely informative map the Aunts gave you.” Her eyes twinkle, but her expression remains serious.

Rey takes the tokens and pass, pokes any straggling tendrils of hair into her winged hood, and gulps in a deep breath before heading out the door and down the cobblestone path. Poe and Finn are busy in the garage, apparently performing some sort of repair on the car. Their laughter echoes down the driveway and mingles with the early morning birdsong.

It’s strange. Happiness isn’t illegal, as it’s impossible to regulate an emotion, yet the sight and sound of happiness seems strange and alien. How can there be happiness in the world when everyone is so regimented and separate? How can people be happy with red shrouded women walking the streets and living in their homes?

The Aunts taught her that it’s easier now, that society has gotten used to the Handmaidens and their function. It was harder in the beginning, they explained, back when people remembered the way Before. There was so much more resistance, they thought they needed every freedom that was given to them. But we learned quickly that freedom to do whatever we desire cannot compare to the freedom we experience now; the freedom from the terrors that lay beyond our borders and within our sinful hearts.

There’s already a small, red-robed figure waiting for her at the end of the path.

“Blessed Be the Fruit,” she says, angling her head just enough that Rey can see her face, round and tan and framed by a couple strands of jet black hair.

Rey’s eyes go wide. “May the Lord open,” she stammers back.

Throughout her entire life, she’s seen quite a few women dressed in the distinctive scarlet garb of the Handmaiden. They’ve had some differences, be it age or height or the relative size of their bodies however, up until now, every Handmaiden she’s seen has been the same in a very distinct way.

Her mind flashes back to a half charred book she found when she was younger, to the pictures of people half a world away from Gilead. Such information became classified around twenty years ago, after the borders were closed and the global news networks were snuffed out. Sure, she’s seen people, different people, working as Marthas or Aunts or Guardians, but never as a Handmaiden, whose role seems to call for a different level of same-ness.
"Are you fine with taking the long way? The weather is quite pleasant today."

It’s not a question. The other woman’s dark eyes lock on her intensely, as if daring her to protest.

She shrugs. "Yes, that sounds wonderful. I’m new, so it will be nice to get to know the neighbourhood a bit more."

"Excellent. I am called Ofhux, by the way, and I’m your partner for daily errands."

"I am pleased to meet you, Ofhux. I am Ofren." The name is sawdust against her tongue.

Together, the women head down the sidewalk, past rows of trees and pert, freshly painted houses. After several blocks they arrive at a checkpoint, manned by two young, fresh faced Guardians that wave them through after a cursory check of their passes.

The path beyond the guards diverges into two. Ofhux guides them right, which leads them into a shallow ravine edged with neatly trimmed bushes. There’s birdsong in the air and the smell of wildflowers lingering in the breeze. If not for the twenty foot wall trimmed with barbed wire that’s blocking their view of the horizon, it would almost be picturesque.

"So, let’s just get this out of the way," Ofhux announces, face forward and unashamed. "I realise I’m probably not who you were expecting."

Rey blushes, embarrassed to be caught staring. "I’m sorry, I’ve just never seen-"

"-a handmaid who looks like me?" Ofhux shrugs. "There’s nothing wrong with admitting that. It’s true, for the most part. Most handmaids look more like you, because that’s what most Commanders and Wives want their children to look like."

"But Commander Hux is different?"

Ofhux slows her steps until they’re barely more than a shuffle. "Commander Hux is a pervert with unresolved issues," she breathes.

Rey stumbles over a root on the peth, her brain suddenly uncoordinated with her feet. Her heart starts pounding in her chest so hard, she swears she can hear it over the rustling trees and chirping birds. "Ofhux-"

The other woman stops outright and spins around to face her. "Look Ofren, I’m not even going to ask, I’m just going to assume. I can trust you, right?"

"Trust...me?"

"You know what I mean." She rolls her eyes. "You don’t exactly seem like the pious sort, do you?"

Rey’s shoulders sag with relief. "No, I suppose I don’t."

There’s a moment of silence as the two women examine each other for any ticks or unevenness in breathing that would indicate dishonesty. Ofhux’s face is steady and determined and, though it may be foolish to assume, Rey can tell from the set of her jaw and the fire in her eyes that she’s trustworthy.

"What do you mean, that your Commander is a pervert?"

The suspicion broken, Ofhux falls back into step and lets out a small chuckle. "I don’t really know how else to explain it. The government can’t afford to be picky anymore, so they’ve started giving
Commanders the option to have an Asian Handmaid. If given a choice, Hux would rather sleep with an Asian woman, so here I am.”

“But you’re from here, right? They wouldn’t have reopened immigration?”

“No, they’re not that desperate yet. Also not desperate enough to open it up to any other non-whites, take that as you will. I assume they’re hoping that any racial markers will come out in the wash after a couple of generations of being mixed back with white people.”

“White.” Rey rolls the word around her mouth, its context stale and unused. “I’ve never heard it put that way.”

“No of course not.” The other woman shrugs. “Now they just call it ‘normal.’”

The shopping centre lies at the foot of a bank of skyscrapers, each tower shiny and looming, contrasting with the quaint diminutivity of the grocery stores below. Up close, Rey can see the familiar cracks and rot that mar the exterior of the towers, which she imagined once used to house the rich and important people from Before. Now they lie fallow and unused, save for the nooks and crannies and forgotten spaces that scavengers and other underground citizens call home.

The food offered at each store seems more like a memory than an actual product. The meat, wrapped in its tan paper, is greying and anemic, and the produce is limp and watery. Even within her nineteen years, Rey has seen the change in the soil and air, the way the ground seems dry and crumbly and used up, and the clouds thin wisps in a dusty sky.

_The Lord will provide_ the government promised when they closed Gilead’s borders, but apparently He couldn’t quite provide enough.

It’s a busy day at the produce mart. Ofux stares longingly at a pile of reddish-pink apples as their fellow Handmaidens mill about. “I can smell them,” she mumbles. “I haven’t smelled an apple in ages.”

Rey frowns. “I don’t think I’ve ever smelled an apple.”

She bends over and, sure enough, catches the barest hints of sweet, tangy, floral, ripe, juicy apple. Her mouth waters, but she doesn’t have the tokens for it today. Instead, all she has in her basket is a bag of slightly green potatoes and a bunch of limp kale. “Maybe they’ll be here tomorrow?”

“I doubt it.”

Ofux doesn’t have meat tokens today, so she just stands awkwardly to the side as Rey chooses some chicken breasts from the counter. Once they’re finished, she marches back down the path, silent until they’re out of sight of the stores.

“How fortunate it must be for you to be in a household that can afford meat,” she mentions, without a hint of malice or jealousy in her voice.

“I suppose?”

Ofux tilts her head enough that Rey can see the hint of a grim smile on her lips. “Fortunate in the context of our positions within these households. Because really we’re all f*cked in the end.”

Rey winces. “Wow. I haven’t heard that word out loud in a while.”

“Why not? It’s just a word.” Ofux grins. “F*ck, f*ck, f*ck, fucking hell, sh*t asshole.”
“But you can’t just say things like that out here. Someone could hear us.”

She stands tall despite her diminutive stance. “Let them listen, if they even are listening, which I doubt. They don’t actually have the resources to be everyplace, everywhere.”

“That’s what Maz and Harter said too.”

Ofhux slows for just a step. She recovers quickly enough, but not before Rey notices the way her fingers twitch. “‘Maz and Harter?’ she asks, her voice a touch higher than usual.

“Yes, the Marthas at the house.”

“I see.”

They’re silent until they reach the gate of Rey’s new home. It feels obscene to not speak with their newfound intimacy, but she can sense that something’s turned in the mind of the other women, and she doesn’t feel like pushing it.

At the fence, Ofhux gives her a nod and a mumbled “Under his Eye”, then bustles down the sidewalk before she can respond. Poe and Finn are still out in the garage when Rey walks down the path, confused and clutching her purchases to her chest like a lifeline. Finn frowns when he sees her wide eyed expression.

“Hey, you okay?” He drops his wrench on the shop floor and rises up to meet her.

Her gaze darts between the two of them. Poe’s face is neutral with only the barest hint of concern, while Finn’s radiates warmth. “Yeah, just-just, sorry, it’s my first day and I just got overwhelmed.”

(Of course.” He pauses, then splutters out, “His Providence can be a burden to behold. It’s such a blessing to have too much bounty to choose from.”

“Yes.” She nods. “Yes, of course. I’m not used to being faced with such prosperity.”

“Indeed. I’m Finn, by the way.”


“That you did.”

There’s an awkwardness among the three of them, fostered by her unique place in the household. The two men stand several paces away, and try not to look at her for too long, instead focusing on her bonnet or the wrapped packages in her arms. Finally, she shrugs her shoulders and hurries inside.

The Marthas try to engage her in conversation, but she can already feel tears starting to prick, so she deposits the food on the counter and hurries upstairs amidst their protests. Closing the door behind her, she slumps down onto her her bed and stares at the darkening patches of wetness on her dress, her loneliness a vice tight grip around her neck.

* 

The dinner had been excessively salty.

Roasted potatoes, boiled peas, and half of a chicken breast poached in stock with two slices of bread on the side. Hearty and filling and admittedly delicious to eat, but now, laying back in her bed and staring at the ceiling, Rey curses her lack of foresight. She’s parched, more so than she’s been in months. Her tongue feels like a raisin and her lips have gone dry and cracked.
Sighing, she wiggles out from under the quilt, shivering against the cold draft that forces itself through some hidden crack in the wall. She pokes her head into her tiny half-bathroom and groans when she sees the miniscule sink, with no room to poke her head under the faucet. She tries to make do with her hands, but if anything the brief sips of water captured from cupped fingers only serve to heighten her extreme thirst.

The house is silent. Maz and Harter are asleep down the hall, Finn and Poe are below, and Phasma retired to the master suite ages ago. The normally creaking and squeaking house rests quietly, relieved of its duties for the night with only the howling wind to disturb it.

Frustrated, she pads over to the door on bare feet, taking care to inch along the wall to avoid any loose floorboards. Her patient fingers coax the door open without a sound, leading her to the pitch black hallway and twisting staircase. She takes her time, running her toes along each riser until they grip the lip that indicates a drop to the step below before she carefully lowers herself down, a step at a time.

The downstairs hall is bathed in cool light trickling in from a tiny window, and her thin form throws leapin shadows across the wallpaper. Urged only by the moonlight streaming through the curtains, she eases herself down the hallway, holding her breath as she passes the lower bedrooms. Shortly, she arrives in the kitchen, only to discover that the glassware cabinet has been locked for the night. A fumbling exploration of the kitchen reveals no other cups readily apparent, only a couple of plastic tubs meant to store leftover food. She’s about to grab one when she hears the soft ‘click’ of a door latch disengaging. In her hurry, she drops the container on the ground and flattens herself against the wall.

“Hello?”

The voice is deep, gravelly, with a touch of weariness.

“Show yourself. I can hear you.”

She hears the swish of fabric against fabric as whoever it is marches through the dining room and into the kitchen. Wincing, she wills the ground to swallow her whole, the only conceivable respite from being discovered and punished.

“Oh.

A tall man looms in the doorway, only a few paces away. His black uniform is a void in the inky darkness, casting his clenched hands and pale face in stark relief. Her gaze is drawn first to his eyes, serious and dark, edged with purplish bruising from many a sleepless night. His nose is long and angular, and he’s scowling, a hint of malice in the lines of his face.

He looks like a monster.

She swears she can feel the ground move under her as he slowly stalks across the kitchen, his boots thudding against the floor. He’s tall, even taller than his Wife, and her stomach drops with disappointment. Perhaps part of her was hoping for someone old and feeble, someone she could pity or who would maybe pity her. Maybe even someone she could fight off but now, faced with the prospect of not one, but two large and strong captors, her chances to escape her fate seem nonexistent.

He pauses an arm’s length away, so close she can smell the hint of sweat and gunpowder clinging to his uniform. He raises his arm, and she flinches, but instead of touching her, he reaches next to her
head and flips the lights on.

She doesn’t know what to say. Nineteen years of subterfuge and scavenging have led to this moment, and all she can do is stare at the ground, instinctively dropping her face to avoid focusing too intently on his. Her heart thumps in her chest.

Stupid, stupid. Her hair falls around her face, and she resists the urge to gather it up in a knot, or tuck it into her nightshirt. It seems vulgar to have it loose, and dangerous. If he wanted to, he could reach out and grab it, and she wouldn’t be able to escape. He could push her up against the countertop, push up her nightdress, and fuck her until she screamed. He could violate her very being if he wanted to.

_Not could. He will._

“Are you-?” His breath catches in his throat.

She nods, still staring at the walnut floorboards. Taking in a deep gulp of air, she wills her shaking throat into submission. “I am called Ofren.”

“Of- ren .”

More silence. She shifts her weight, and the floor squeaks in protest.

“You arrived yesterday.”

“Yes.”

“My transport was delayed. I was unable to make it in in time. I’m-”

“Yes.”

“I trust that you’ve been sufficiently briefed on the household?”

“Yes.”

“I see. And what brings you to the kitchen at this hour?”

Anger flares hot in her cheeks, and she tears her eyes away from the floor to face him.

“I was- am - thirsty. There’s no drinking glass in my room, and I assumed-”

“That there would be no one downstairs to see you.”

“Yes. I apologize for my mistake.”

“There’s no n-” He bites his lip and nods. “Yes. Be sure to mention that to one of the Marthas tomorrow, and they can ensure that your room is outfitted with several glasses. Plastic...glasses.” His voice is awkward and stilted.

She’s about to sidle her way out of the kitchen, thirst be damned, because she can’t handle how his hands are twitching and he keeps swallowing like he’s got a wriggling frog in his throat. “Well, I’ll just-”

“Is it okay? Your room, I mean.”

“My room? Yes, it’s very- very adequate.”
He nods. “Good. Phasma wanted to make sure it was done right. You’re the first person who’s stayed in it. I just, if you’re missing anything else, just let one of the Marthas know.”

“I will, thank you.”

“You’re-” Another swallow. “-you’re welcome.”

*Run away, run away*, her body is screaming at her, because she’s not even supposed to *be* here, and if he wanted to, he could take whatever he wanted from her, and nothing would be done. After all, how would it be any different? Either on the counter here, or in an overstuffed, four poster bed upstairs, it would still be the same act with the same players.

“I’m just going to-” She nods, pointing a trembling finger behind her to the hallway door. When he doesn’t respond, she slowly eases herself out of her hiding place and heads to the door, face forward and teeth clenched.

“Wait!”

She freezes, holding her breath. There’s a shuffle, the clicking of a lock and a latch, and then a small cough. Slowly, heart thumping in her chest, she turns to meet the Commander, who’s handing her a cut crystal tumbler in his outstretched hand.

“Here, take it for the night. You must be really thirsty to come all the way down here, and I don’t know where the Marthas keep anything else.”

Rey’s eyes dart between the glass and his face. “I-I can’t,” she stammers. “If they find that in my room, I’ll be punished.”

“Who is they, and why would they punish you?” He frowns. “I’ll tell Phasma that-”

“Please don’t.” Her fingertips rest on the cold crystal, and gently push it back in his direction. “I can just use my hands, it’s okay.”

“Ofren. Just take it.”

His face is still gently pleading, but there’s a hardness in his voice. It’s the voice of a man who’s used to directing troops, to being listened to and obeyed. It makes her legs seize up and her teeth chatter and, more out of self preservation than anything, she grabs the glass from his outstretched hand and clutches it to her chest.

The cut crystal digs into her fingers. Her eyes dart to the lacquered wood countertop, then to the metal handle of the refrigerator, then back again to the counter. Both seem hard enough to crack the glass into shards big enough to grasp, without shattering it entirely. If she timed it correctly, she could smash the glass and rush the Commander, maybe take out one of his eyes or nick the throbbing vein in his neck.

She pictures the way the blood might rush from his throat, spilling over his dark wool collar and into the black of his jacket. Maybe it would drip onto the pretty medals pinned to his chest, or seep into the pure white of his shirt.

Would he beg for mercy? No, of course not. Even if she caught him in the eye, he could still overpower her in a second. His hands look big enough; he could use one to hold her down while the other could encircle her neck and crush her windpipe. Just a bit, of course, for her body would still be too important to sacrifice, despite her treachery. But her feet and hands and wrists aren’t vital to the act of procreation, in fact a lack of mobility would probably aid him in the long run.
She’s seen them before, women, shrouded in red and swollen with pregnancy being rolled around in wheelchairs or walking about with arms in braces and bruises on their faces. Commanders used to be more discreet, but times are desperate now, and a disobedient handmaid could mean the end of a career and loss of livelihood for these men.

How far would this one go?

“Ofren.”

Peeling her gaze from the crystal, she looks up at him. His face has gone soft, almost beseeching.

“Yes?”

“Do you need anything else?”

She wants to scream.

“N-no, nothing at all.”

“Are you sure?” The corner of his mouth turns up in a shadow of a smile. “No one will notice the missing glass, so you have nothing to worry about.”

She can’t help it; the crystal slips from her clammy fingers and shatters on the wooden floor. Heart pounding, her eyes meet the Commander’s shocked expression, then she dashes out the door, down the hallway, and up the stairs before any other duplicitous words escape from his lips. Her fingers close around her doorknob as she closes it behind her, searching for a lock or latch that isn’t there, some sort of assurance that she has one solid barrier between them, at least for now.

There’s a hint of heavy footsteps at the foot of the stairs, then the squeak of a protesting tread. A pause, a musing- the sacred women’s space upstairs is such an intentional territory to invade. He must think better of it, for the stair relents and the sound of retreating boots echoes through the walls, leaving Rey huddled under her blanket, her gasping breath and thrumming heart competing with the whistle of the nighttime wind.
Ritual

Chapter Notes

TW: rape and discussions of rape

If possible, the house becomes even more stark and oppressive after he arrives home.

Maz and Harter become quiet, sullen, when he’s in the house, performing their duties in silence and producing meals that fail to belie the mediocrity of their ingredients. Poe is grumpy and stomps around the yard when he thinks no one is looking. Even the Wife is chillier than usual, her regular dismissive nature transformed into outright resentment and ice.

Only Finn remains friendly, at least when the Commander is out of earshot. It’s nice, but it does nothing to quiet the nagging voice in the back of Rey’s head, the one whispering of deception and mistrust.

“He’s a bit of a whiner, eh?” Finn adjusts his forest green cap while balancing a bag of groceries on his hip. “You’d think he’d be a bit more grateful about all that he has.”

“Mnhmm.” She averts her eyes from his, and concentrates on not dropping the precious eggs on the walkway. They’ll have to go without meat for two days to be able to afford them, all so that the Commander can have one of his favourite cakes. “I suppose it may seem that way,” she muses carefully, “but it’s not in our place to say so.”

“Come on, Ofren,” he mutters. “You can’t tell me that you’re exactly thrilled about this little arrangement.”

“I am blessed to be a vessel for His providence,” she returns, the barest hint of a bite in her voice. “We should all be so lucky.”

Finn huffs. Shifting the groceries, he opens the side door for her, and together they walk into the kitchen. The Marthas are already prepping for the evening meal, and the room smells of herbs and carrots.

Maz shakes her head disapprovingly. “Finn, you know that Ofren doesn’t need help carrying those.”

He groans. “It’s boiling outside, Maz, and she’s already carried them all the way back from the store. I highly doubt I’m going to get in trouble for carrying one bag of groceries for barely a hundred feet.”

“It’s not you I’m worries about.”

Rey busies herself with putting away a sack of flour, her cheeks burning.

“They’d have to go through all of us to get to her. Don’t you dare deny it.” Finn drops his bag on the counter and gestures to its contents. “She’s going through enough right now to have to worry about hauling food for a Commander who’s the size of a house. Seriously, how much does that guy eat?”

None of the women take the bait. As one, they turn back to their tasks, leaving Finn fuming against
the counter. “Fine,” he says, and stalks out the side door and down to the garage.

“Don’t trust that one, Ofren.”

Rey can just hear Maz’s voice above the clacking of knives against their cutting boards. “I’m sorry?” she breathes.

“You heard her.” It’s Harter this time, murmuring into the tiled wall as she turns to wash her vegetables. “It’s not safe to converse with those who are so outspoken.”

The suspicious voice in her head screams in the affirmative. “But both you and Maz-?”

“There’s a time and a place. Before was safer, but now-”

“-now there’s other factors to consider,” Maz finishes, still chopping methodically. “Certain members of this household are under a lot of scrutiny.”

The illicit contents of her folder, stuffed away under her mattress upstairs, flash before her eyes. “Does it have anything to do with any family connections of people who live here?”

“Yes.” Maz scrapes a clove of garlic against the chopping block, releasing its pungent, sulfurous odour into the air. “Connections both real and manufactured.”

Maz’s words echo in her ears as she retreats back to her bedroom. She pulls the file from its hiding spot and flips to the page with the household information. Now that she’s seen his face in real life, the Commander’s features are more easily recognizable from the blurry photograph; his large, crooked nose, dark eyes, wide mouth, and prominent ears, topped with a mane of wavy black hair. Under the photograph, his name and age are listed, along with his family ties.

**FATHER: SNOKE, Praetor**

That’s it. No first name or any other identifying features. There’s a twist in her gut; she knows that name, heard it before in the news or out on the street. It stirs the same feelings that Anakin’s name did, feelings of influence and power and far-reaching grasps.

She holds the name close, and waits.

It comes up again, sooner than she expected. Even though he’s not on the front lines, the Commander’s work life is apparently still intertwined with the government and military, so much so that he often brings home fat binders stuffed with papers that threaten to spill from its confines. He’s only been back for barely a week before one makes an escape, trailing down to the ground as he arrives through the front door.

Rey watches it flutter like a leaf in the wind. She puts her mug of tea down on the dining table and slowly walks across the room until she’s only a few feet from it. The Commander stops, one foot on the staircase, almost as if he can sense that one sheet is missing from the hundreds in his grip.

She can’t help it. Crouching down, she retrieves the paper from the floor under the guise of being helpful. Her eyes trail over the forbidden angles and curves, her mind sputtering to life to decipher them.

_Troops surrounded...Potential famine...midwest...drought...Snoke is confident that there will be a swift recovery...Adventists discovered twenty miles off the front...Skywalker still at large...ties to Mayday...Mayday..._
It’s too late. The Commander’s seen her shocked expression, and the way her eyes followed the text in line on the page, too engaged to just be curious. Brow furrowed, he snatches the briefing from her hands and shoves it into his pocket.

“Don’t” He pauses, reassessing his words, his scowl softening before he continues. “-those aren’t meant for you. Obviously, I mean, but-”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know, just-”

“I swear I didn’t even catch most of it, of course, since I can’t-”

He waves his hand, cutting her off. “Of course. It’s not important, I should have realised that you can’t. Thank you for retrieving this.”

He stalks off without another word.

Skywalker. Yet another trinket to add to her horde of scavenged information.

* 

“Has it happened yet?”

Ofhux’s question is light, but there’s an undercurrent of darkness in her tone. There’s no need to question what “it” is.

“No.”

“Then soon, I’m guessing? You’ve been there for a few weeks now, haven’t you?”

“Two weeks tomorrow.” Rey clenches her gloved hands into fists, fingers closing around the bags of groceries. Her gaze wanders to a particularly beautiful bush off the edge of the pathway. “I have a doctor’s appointment in a couple of days. Then I’ll know for sure when it’s happening.”

“Ah.”

“How bad is it?” Her voice sounds thin and reedy to her own ears. Knowing won’t make it any easier, but there’s a hint of solace found in the fact that this is one thing she shares with someone else.

“I’m not going to lie to you; it’s worse than you could possibly imagine.” Ofhux slows her steps. “At least the first time. The times after, it’s not that it’s better, but it will hurt less. Physically, that is. Mentally, it never gets easier.”

Anxiety claws at the edges of her mind, forcing Rey to stop for a second to catch her breath. “I-I don’t know if I can just lie there. I’ve always been on the move, always run away from these things, I have to have to fight it or something.”

“Then fight it. I did, my first time.” Her face twists into a look of disgust. “But he liked it even more that way. He liked seeing me there, struggling as the Wife held me down. And it’ll be harder for you; I’ve seen your Commander and his Wife. They could eat you alive if they wanted to.”

Rey frowns. “You’ve seen them?”

“My Commander had them over for dinner one day. You remember, the day I bought the fish?”
“Right, yeah.” She remembers the twist of envy she felt watching the butcher wrap up four fillets of pale pink salmon behind the counter. Of course that bounty wouldn’t have been shared with the rest of the household. “How did you know it was them?”

Ofhux grins. “How many other Commander Rens are there, Ofren” she teases. It doesn’t last, however, and her expression goes sober before she continues. “I’ve never seen such a strong, cruel looking woman, and he looks even stronger. I’m so sorry, Ofren.”

“Thanks.”

“You can fight if you want to, but I would just recommend you to relax.” She nudges Rey’s shoulder with her own as a sign of solidarity. “It hurts less that way.”

* 

This doctor’s office is far warmer than the first, though still stark and sterile. This doctor himself is younger than the previous one, his face unlined and impassive, and he examines her with light, clinical touches, as if he’s afraid she’s going to break under his care.

It takes her five embarrassingly long minutes to relax enough to release a pitiful offering of urine into the proffered cup. He accepts it with the same neutral expression, then passes it off to one of his gowned assistants. Next, he draws a vial of her blood, piercing the tender flesh inside of her elbow to do so. Fascinated, Rey watches the scarlet liquid flow from her arm and splatter inside the clean glass.

Finally, he coaxes her higher on the examination tab and spreads her legs with a latex-covered prod of his hand. Dropping her head back onto the paper-swathed pillow, she lets her eyes wander over the pure white ceiling as she feels his blunt, gel-coated instrument breach her folds.

“It all looks good,” he observes aloud. It takes Rey a second to realize that he’s speaking to Phasma, whose silhouette she can see on the other side of the curtain. “Everything is well formed with no scarring. I don’t anticipate any difficulties with conception or carrying a child.”

“Good. My husband will be happy to hear that.”

An assistant ducks into the examination room and passes him a piece of paper. “More good news,” he announces. “All of the tests came back clean, and it looks as though the peak fertile period will be tomorrow. Are you all prepared at home? I know that this will be the first time trying for your family.”

From where she lies, Rey can just see a hint of Phasma’s indigo shoes as the other woman crosses and uncrosses her ankles. “We’ll manage,” she says, her cool voice drifting through the curtain. “My husband is extremely eager to proceed, so I’m sure he’s been practicing.”

A jolt of fear rumbles through Rey’s body and her hands start shaking before she remembers that Phasma is most likely referring to the ceremonial readings that must be read aloud before the ritual takes place.

“Excellent.” The doctor removes his gloves and tosses them into an open garbage can. “Well, my work here is done, for now. May the Lord open.”

* 

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.
A snort of derision, the static of a television, the drag of a knife through overcooked meat.

_And Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel: and he said, Am I in God’s stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?_

Heavy boots in the entryway, a sullen brow, the echo of a deep voice in a silent room.

_And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her._

Soap suds between shaking fingers, a swath of scarlet over pale skin, bland food a smear of glue against her tongue.

_and she handed him Bilhah her handmaid to wife: and Jacob went in unto her._

She’s flat on her back again. This time, the ceiling is ornate, adorned with a gilded chandelier suspended from a carved medallion, painted white. Her head is on Phasma’s lap, and she’s so close, she can smell the ozonic crispness of the other woman’s lotion.

Swathed in a layer of indigo cotton and wrapped in a starched white bonnet, her head feels like it’s going to explode from the pressure building up within. There’s the click of the door opening, then the throbbing intensifies as the Commander walks in, still clothed in his dark uniform. The clash of scarlet against black is obscene as he raises her skirt to slide down her underwear. His fingers are freezing.

The Wife intensifies her grip, as if anticipating Rey’s resistance, but there’s no need. Rey tries to relax, like Ofhux recommended, but she’s still tense, waiting for the plunge of white hot pain. There’s a brush against her and she flinches, but no oppressive push, not yet. Instead she feels a strange, hesitant poking feeling. It kind of feels like the doctor’s examination from earlier, except colder and less sure. It’s not pleasant, far from it to be honest, but it’s not as uncomfortable as she was expecting.

She chances a glance up, and sees that the Commander’s right hand is hidden under her dress. His brow is wrinkled with concentration, and his eyes are focused ahead. After a few moments, Phasma lets out a long-suffering sigh. “What on Earth are you doing?” she asks crisply, nails digging into Rey’s palms.

The Commander lets out a huff of air, and the intrusion stills. “I just thought that I should, I don’t know- I don’t want her to tear or anything.”

A sharp, biting laugh. “She’ll have a month to recover. Now come on, we’re all getting tired and would like to get to bed soon.

“But won’t stress and infection lower the chance of-?”

“Just put it in, Kylo, for goodness sakes. You don’t need to put on a show, and it’s not like she’s going to be enjoying it anyways.”

Rey’s face flames. It’s one thing to be treated like a piece of meat, like a vessel or incubator for a stranger’s child, but it’s another indignity entirely to have to listen passively as the state of one’s genitals is discussed by a couple of bickering spouses.

He glares daggers at his wife, then huffs and removes his freezing cold fingers from inside of Rey,
who bites her lip to keep from whimpering. Then there’s the fleshy, slapping sound of skin on skin, which prompts Phasma to roll her eyes to the ceiling and groan. After a minute or two it’s gone, then he comes closer, lining his hips up between hers, then pushes himself against the scarlet skirts of her gown.

An intrusion, warm this time, and far fuller than the last. It burns enough to bring tears to Rey’s eyes. She chews her lip, muffling her screams in the raw flesh under her teeth as he slowly, painfully eases his way into her. She’s tearing apart, one side pinned to the bed, the other pulled to oblivion, and a voice is screaming at her to just keep running.

It’s mechanical; in and out, in and out, in and out. He fucks her like a piston, like the screaming jackhammers she used to see rattling and destroying old mosques and churches on the outskirts of the city. His eyes are focused ahead, no doubt locked on his stony-faced wife, whose hands are gripping Rey’s hard enough to bruise.

“Get on with it, please. I’ve got things to do tomorrow, and would really like to get to bed.” The Wife’s voice is an icicle in the already chilly room. “For once in your life, could you just-”

“Shut up,” he spits, pausing to adjust his stance before resuming his thrusting, eyes closed. Rey closes hers as well; any respite from the heavy black suiting and disgusting reality in front of her. Her mind wanders, hovers above her body for a second, then travels down the staircase, out the door, and down the walkway.

She’s running down the road again, bare feet against scalding concrete, the woman next to her, urging her forward. She sees the crack in the building, sees the dark and smells the wood shavings, hears the angry voices. She’s so close, her fingers scrabbling against the wall, but then there’s a hand on her shoulder, pulling her back and no, it didn’t happen like this, let me go, please, let me go.

She’s back on the bed again. The Commander’s hand is clutching at her shoulder, his thumb rubbing circles against her collarbone. His breathing has gone irregular, and his face is twisted as if he’s the one in pain. Finally, mercifully, his brown eyes go wide, and his mouth falls open. “Oh-.”

There’s a rush of warmth, and then the burning intrusion is forcibly removed from her as Phasma leans forward and pushes him off. “Alright, we’re done here, right?”

“Be careful,” he hisses, leaning down to retrieve his pants. When he rights himself, she can see that his face is blotchy and red, and his eyes are glassy. “You’ve got to keep her laying down for at least ten minutes.”

“Oh come on.” Rey can feel the other woman shifting impatiently. “That’s nonsense.”

“You said you wanted to get this over with, I say we do it right the first time.” His expression is weary yet firm. “She stays, ten minutes at least.”

“You need to stop reading those useless books. Obsessing over this isn’t going to make her any more fertile. Can’t we just-?”

“Phasma.” Her name sounds strange coming out of his mouth, like a formal title or designation. He shakes his head and runs his fingers through his hair. “Don’t be difficult, not now.”

“Kylo-”

He’s out the door without a backward glance, footsteps echoing down the hallway. Rey feels Phasma tense up behind her.
“You have ten minutes Ofren. I expect to find you gone when I return.”

She stands up abruptly, letting Rey’s body fall back onto the bed with a ‘wumpf’, then stomps out the door, leaving the other woman cold and dripping on the edge of the bed. The sound of her voice, accompanied by Commander’s lower tones, echoes up the stairs.

Maz is waiting outside the door with a warm, damp towel and a fresh pair of underwear. Rey’s face burns with shame, but her body doesn’t seem to want to move from its position flat on the mattress. Fortunately the older woman seems to understand. Ever so slowly, she inches towards the bed, her eyes fixed on a point on the wall off in the distance.

“Do you mind if I enter?”

“No.” Rey’s voice sounds hollow in the vast emptiness of the room.

“Okay.” Maz takes the final steps towards her, then gently sits down on the edge of the bed. “I just want to let you know that you are allowed to feel whatever you’re feeling right now. You’re allowed to be upset. Harter and I are here for you, if you need anything.”

She waits for tears, but there are none. Instead, Rey just stares blankly up at the ceiling, and murmurs, “But what if I don’t feel anything?”

“That’s fine too.”

She moves to lower the scarlet gown that’s bunched up around the other woman’s thighs. Rey flinches, involuntarily, so she backs off and folds her hands in her lap. “Hopefully it’ll take,” she whispers, her raspy voice melting into the still night air. “Then you can have a bit of a respite, from this part of it at least.”

“But then what?” Rey whispers back. “What if I get horribly sick? What if the baby dies or if it’s a Scrapper? What if-?” She bites back a sob that suddenly rolls up from her gut. “-what if it’s beautiful and perfect, and I fall in love? Then what?”

The loneliness clouds her brain like a toxic fog. To be able to nurture life, give her all to someone else who may possibly love her in return, only to have it all ripped away. Can the heart truly survive such tragedy?

“You’ll be safe, at least,” Maz murmurs. “It’s a small consolation, yes, but it’s still one positive. You will never have to worry about being an Unwoman. And the child would be loved, I promise you that. I swear that Harter and I would love the child as much as if it were our own.”

“Do you think they would-?”

She lets out a dry chuckle. “Phasma is incapable of love, but I think even she wouldn’t be cruel to a child. She would be cold, but not cruel, not to such a gift. And Kylo-” Maz pauses, musing. “-that I don’t know.”

“I would fight them,” Rey breathes. She can feel the adrenaline rush through her veins, waking her muscles and electrocuting her brain. Clenching her fists, she says through gritted teeth, “I would fight with everything I’ve got. I could never abandon my own child. I could never-”

“Save your strength.” Maz attempts to adjust the dress again, and is met with no resistance. Passing the now lukewarm cloth to Rey, she collects the soiled undergarments, then cautions, “There’s no use worrying about things that haven’t happened yet, not when you have so much else to face.”
“I can feel something now,” Rey admits. She hoists herself up, wincing at the rush of blood to her head and the stinging burn between her legs. Maz’s cloth is a cool respite against her aching flesh. “I feel angry.”

Or at least she feels like she should feel angry. But right now, all she can feel, aside from the pervasive aching loneliness, is the harsh oppression of walls closing in, doors locking, maps bleeding, words crumbling to dust before her eyes. She feels trapped.
Gifts

There’s a muffin on her tray for breakfast, so hot it’s still steaming, along with a bowl of red berries and a mug of fragrant creamy tea.

When she first woke up this morning she barely had the stomach for anything, and now she can feel it gnawing and growling in anticipation. She sighs, a slight smile on her face and tears welling in her eyes; Harter and Maz must have bustled away at the crack of dawn to get these treats for her, however impossible it seems.

Mercifully, her sleep was dreamless last night. She was anticipating dark shapes, grating pain, and the press of a body atop her own, but all she got was the same benign nothingness as always, a quick interlude before returning to the land of the waking. It was a small mercy, but still appreciated.

She pops a berry into her mouth and groans. It’s tangy and sweet, with just a hint of rich, musky floral flavour. The soft flesh gives way to hundreds of tiny seeds, which taste nutty and catch in the gaps between her teeth. It’s amazing, and there’s at least twenty more of them in the bowl. For a second, she wonders whether she could somehow keep them, somehow savour them over a couple of days, but there’s no possible place to keep them in her sparse bedroom and marginally equipped bathroom. Sighing, she eats another berry, determined to wring every last drop of pleasure out of them while they last.

The muffin looks mouth watering tempting. She tears it open, and instantly the room is filled with the scent of bright sunshine on a summer day. She inhales, letting the scent fill her lungs, warming her from the inside out. There’s a small dish of soft margarine on the tray so, with trembling fingers, she slowly spreads the squishy, melting gooeyness over the muffin half, letting it seep into the bubbles and cracks to infuse them with richness. She takes a bite and her mouth is filled with sweet, tinged with sour and bitter and a light saltiness that’s so decadent, she wonders whether it’s what real butter tastes like.

Now that she’s awake, her brain begins to process the events of the previous day. It catalogues everything, every touch, every sound, scent, and taste, saving what will help her get through the day while storing everything else away for later. It’s how she’s learned to be after years of sitting through intense hunger and pain; she kept anything useful, then stored away the hurt to be processed later.

And it does hurt. There’s a throb between her legs that sends a fission of soreness up her spine. Her skin feels tired from being tensed up for hours on end. Even as she eats these delicious berries, she can feel her stomach begin to unfurl after being clenched up tight. She sighs against a bite of muffin, inhaling sunlight and willing herself to heal, if just for a moment.

Or not. Her heart thumps painfully in her chest. There appears to be a slip of paper no wider than a shoelace rolled up at the bottom of the dish, the tail end of it just visible enough to ensure that it’s not accidentally eaten. With trembling fingers, she pulls the paper out from between the leftover berries and unfurls it to reveal two words inscribed in scrawling, rich ink:

I’m sorry

Bile jumps up to the back of her throat, and she chokes. She wrestles down her gorge to ensure that the precious food doesn’t go to waste, though the memory of it turns to rot in her stomach.

It could be from Maz and Harter, she reasons with herself. They both know how to read and write, and they both had access to my food this morning. It makes the most sense that it was one of them,
or both.

It makes the most sense, but deep down in the pit of her belly she knows it’s not the case. The fineness of the paper and the way the rich ink bleeds and saturates its fibers belies its exclusivity. There’s a whiff of gunpowder clinging to it like a cologne. She’s seen this paper before in the stacks of paper the Commander imports home every day and she would be willing to bet that this little slip belonged to a sheet emblazoned with the inscription From the desk of Commander Kylo Ren.

The writing itself is confident, though brief. Her first instinct is to rip the paper to shreds and perhaps flush it down the toilet for good measure. Her first instinct is to destroy it like he destroyed her, but at the last minute she relents and instead shoves it under her mattress with all the other words she’s hoarding.

There’s still a few berries left at the bottom of the bowl. She leaves them, even though the primal core of her brain is still panting at their deliciousness. Sure, they were tempting initially, but she can’t be bribed.

Harter raises an eyebrow when she deposits the tray down on the kitchen counter. “Thank you, it was delicious,” Rey says. “I appreciate the effort you put in.”

“Of course.” The other woman brazenly pops the remaining berries into her mouth and hums with pleasure. “Delightful.”

“Yes.”

Maz walks over, offering the day’s tokens in an outstretched hand. “More chicken today, please,” she announces. “And see if there’s a yam or two. If not, I suppose we’ll have to make do with parsnips.”

“Yams are the orange ones, right?”

“Orange, yes. Or sweet potatoes, which are yellower, though I haven’t seen a true sweet potato in years.”

Rey’s about to answer when the clatter of silverware against china steals her attention. She almost looks over, curious, at the source of the noise, but her instincts stop her. Of course he’d be eating breakfast this morning, and of course he’d take it in the dining room. Pointedly, she moves to lock her eyes on anything, so she fixates on the bowl of bread dough proofing next to the oven.

There’s a scrape of wood against wood, of a chair leg being dragged on a hardwood floor. Maz pats her arm. “Best be going now,” she mutters. “Before all the good yams have been taken. Not that I can’t make do with sweet potatoes, but you know I—”

“Ofren?”

His voice sounds rough and raspy, as if he hasn’t slept for weeks. She doesn’t give a damn. Her eyes are still glued to the bowl of dough as her body walks mechanically over to the side door. Skin crawling, muscles screaming, she pushes it open and walks down the pathway, tokens clutched in one sweaty hand. She doesn’t look back until she’s almost reached the end of the walkway. Even from a distance, she can still see his dark eyes glittering behind the glass.

Different possibilities swirl through her brain as she meets up with Ofhux at the gate. Maybe a mature bush could yield a particularly sharp or sturdy branch that could be fashioned into a weapon. The press of his hand on her shoulder echoes faintly, and she wonders whether Ofhux would be able to strangle her before any Guardians show up.
Tempered glass and plastic cups. Blunt butter knives and a tiny sink. They’ve taken away anything she could use against herself, against them.

Ofhux is looking up at the house, narrowed eyes locked on the door Rey had just closed. “Blessed be the fruit,” she intones.

“May the Lord open.” Rey’s voice is shaking.

“How was your day yesterday?” Ofhux tears her gaze away from the house and starts striding down the sidewalk.

Rey starts and jogs for a bit to keep up with the smaller woman’s elevated pace. “It was...fine.”

“Fine?”
“Yes.”
“I see.”

They pass the sentries in silence, offering up their passes to the Guardians who seem to be getting younger and younger each day. Only once they’re in the relative safety of a thicket of bushes does Ofhux murmur, “You only need to say the word.”

It’s so quiet, the words almost dissolve on the wind. “S-sorry?” Rey splutters.

“Did he hit you?” Ofhux’s eyes are bright, insistent. “Does he make you do it more than once? Does he make you do things that are unnatural? There’s a waiting list, of course, but if it’s truly that bad, I can speak to one of my contacts, and we can get you out of there right away.”

Rey’s heart leaps. “Out, like away somewhere? Where would I go?”

“Up into the mountains, in Canada. It’s a long trip, but I’ve heard that the compound is beautiful.”

“In Canada? B-but why aren’t you there right now, if there’s an opportunity to go?”

“I don’t need it,” Ofhux’s jaw is set, resigned. “And besides, they need me here. I have an in- and the Commander isn’t as bad as he used to be.”

“But what if you get-?”

“Then a spot will open up for me. That’s why I need to be here, to let them know and give them names and locations. They’re bigger than the government knows, bigger than ever. There’s agents everywhere, at every level.”

“Mayday.” Rey feels a chill go up her spine. “Do you think there’s Commanders and Wives that are a part of it?”

“I don’t doubt it.”

They solemnly collect the day’s groceries, surrounded on all sides by the press of of red and multicoloured stripes. The Econowives, dressed so colourfully to denote their all-purpose role in the household, seem calmer, happier than the Handmaidens. Sister Jael had instilled pity for them, for the fact that they had to do so much with so little reward, however the soreness between her legs and the heaviness in her heart tells Rey that there are some things worse than having too much to do.

“Why me?” she wonders on their way back.
Ofhux frowns. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know exactly, it’s just that everything has happened so quickly that I don’t actually know how or why I got here.” Rey sighs, letting her fingers dangle as they pass a plush bush, relishing the feeling of the glossy leaves brushing against her fingertips. “I guess, more specifically, why do you trust me? I honestly would question it even more if I didn’t know in my heart that you’re being honest.”

“And how do you know that?” Ofhux’s smile is slight, but still cheeky.

“If you were a spy, I would probably be dead already.”

“True.”

“But why me?” Rey asks again. “Why did you trust me? It would be nice to at least know that.”

“Because my sister told me I could trust you.” Ofhux turns her face away. “Her name’s Paige. She was in the same re-education centre as you.”

*Paige. Paige, Paige, Paige.* “Yes, I remember the name, but how-?”

“She works as a Jezebel now, she escaped the centre and-”

“She escaped! But how-?”

“Ofren.” Her voice is deathly serious now. They’ve been walking, albeit slowly, and the guards are within eyesight. “You’re right to be suspicious. There’s a lot of attention surrounding that house you’re in, and my contacts have reason to believe that you weren’t placed there randomly.”

“So you think I was ch-chosen? Like you were?”

“I don’t know.”

They’re still a block away from the house when she spots a familiar green shape on the sidewalk, seemingly waiting for her. It’s Finn, his cap in his hands, shifting nervously from foot to foot.

“Ofren,” he greets once they’re within earshot.

“Finn.” She’s careful to keep her face down, clothing herself in a veil of modesty. “This is my shopping partner Ofhux. Ofhux, this is Finn.”

“I see.” The other woman’s voice is startlingly icy. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Ofren.”

“Yes, I-”

Rey frowns as she watches Ofhux dart back down the sidewalk. It’s strange, but she knows better than to question the behavior; there’s layers upon layers of secrets here, and it’s highly likely that her companion knows something she’s not privy to yet.

“He wants to see you.”

Finn’s face is blank, impassive, as he approaches her on the walkway to the backdoor. She shifts her bag of groceries and frowns. “Who wants to see me?”

“The Commander. Tonight.”
Her hands threaten to give out under the weighty produce, but luckily she manages to keep it together. “The Commander?” she rasps. “Did he say why?”

Instinctively, Finn takes the grocery bag from her arm, and opens the door to the kitchen. “No reason, but it probably has something to do with last night.”

“Right.” Her face flames. It’s not a secret when the Ceremony happens in any household, however reluctantly it may be celebrated here, but she still feels exposed, like she’s been caught naked wandering the halls. Maz’s kind gestures, Harter’s knowing look, the dark expression on Finn’s face right now, they’re all out of kindness and concern, but they really only serve to make her feel more ashamed.

“Are you okay?” His voice is low as to not draw further ire from the Marthas. They’re already glowering at his assistance with the groceries. “I’m sorry for telling you this, but he insisted I let you know right away.”

“It’s alright Finn, it’s not your fault.” Her shaking fingers deposit a bundle of bitter kale on the counter, then root around for the accompanying sausage at the bottom of the sack. “You’re just following orders, and I understand that.”

He frowns and snaps, “It’s not like that!”

Maz and Harter pause their cooking and look up, eyebrows raised. “It’s not like what?” Harter asks, knife poised over yesterday’s carrots.

“I’m not-I’m not a-”

“We are who they say we are,” Maz intones. “I would say there’s no shame in that, but you and I both know that’s not true.”

“I’m not his assistant,” Finn insists. “I’m no one’s servant.”

“We’re all servants for somebody. The only difference is who we choose to serve.”

Rey folds her empty grocery bag into thirds and places it under the sink. “So, you were saying?”

He shakes his head and slightly nods towards the other woman.

“Just spit it out,” she groans. “You can trust them, I promise.”

“It’s not really me I’m worried about, but if you say so.” He faces her, fully aware that the Marthas are eavesdropping without a hint of subtlety. “He wants to see you tonight at eight o’clock, in his office. The Wife is going to her friend’s house to have tea and socialize.”

“So she doesn’t know...isn’t supposed to know.”

“No, and I get the feeling that this isn’t a one time offer.” He makes to grab her arm, but reconsiders and instead lays his hand on the counter. “Look, I can look out for you tonight, but only tonight. Poe’s leaving in the next couple of days, but tonight he can check in with the security detail without me. Once he’s gone, I won’t be able to leave my post. Do you understand?”

“What do you mean ‘look out’ for me? What are you going to do if he- if he tries something? If he attacks me?”

“I don’t know, I’ll-“
“Don’t be stupid. That goes for both of you.” Maz shuffles over, her weathered face serious. “Ofren, if he wants you to go, you only have two choices. You either go, or you leave this house tonight and never come back. I can’t make that choice for you, but I assure you that while you’re in this house, Harter and I will support you as much as we can.”

“Me too,” Finn chimes in.

She rolls her eyes, but can’t quite hide the hint of a smile. “I know it doesn’t seem like much, especially after what happened last night, but if anything gets worse, I promise you that we’ll do our best to get you out of here.”

Rey stares at the three of them, who are staring back at her with earnest intentions written on their faces. “I’ll stay then, and go tonight,” she decides. “And I would appreciate you looking out for me, even if it’s just to know that I’m not alone.”

“You’re not alone,” Harter rasps. She walks over and pats Rey’s hand, soft and reassuring. “I know it sometimes feels like you are, but you’re not alone. Not in this house.”

*

Eight o’clock chimes heavily in the entryway, eight brassy gongs uttered by the ancient grandfather clock that echo through the dining room, kitchen, and hallway, then up the stairs to whisper at Rey’s door. She smooths her clammy hands against her scarlet gown, trying to will her rolling gut to be calm. After all, it’s highly unlikely that the Commander will react favourably to her vomiting all over his uniform.

Finn is waiting for her in the hallway downstairs. “I’ve told Poe what’s going on,” he whispers, unnecessarily. There’s no need to keep it secret now that the Wife is away. “He’ll try and stall her once she’s back, if you haven’t already left.”

“I didn’t even think of that,” Rey hisses. “What would she do if she-?”

“She’s not going to find out.” His voice is firm. “You’re going to go in, have a quick chat, and be back upstairs before she’s finished her first cup of tea.”

“That’s a nice thought.” Her voice is shaking.

“Hey.” This time he does touch her, just a soft hand on her elbow. “It’s going to be fine. Nothing’s going to happen to you.”

It’s already happened to me, she wants to scream. Where were you last night? Where were any of you last night?

But that was different, and she knows it. Last night was ceremony and sterility and control, a necessary evil to ensure the continuation of the species. Tonight is an aberration, unpredictable and indulgent, secretive and behind closed doors.

Even though she’s lived in the house for several weeks now, she’s never taken the time to appreciate the grand staircase. It makes sense, as she only first climbed these stairs last night, and the details from that occasion are now fuzzy at best. Tonight, she focuses on all of the tiny details, grounding herself in the small luxuries to keep her mind from abandoning her again out of panic.

The varnished wooden handrails are just as soft as she’d imagined, and the carpet is plush and yielding under her feet. There’s four walnut doors on the landing; one is cracked open, revealing the hint of a pristine marble tiled bathroom, and the two on the right remain a mystery as Finn guides
them to the one on the far left. It leads to another entryway, smaller and more intimate, with three more walnut doors. These are all open, indicating the privacy of the sanctum they have just entered.

Her stomach flips when she glances at the room on the left. It’s swathed in gauzy curtains, lined with shelves full of colourful picture books, and contains a rocking chair and an empty crib. Her abdomen throbs in response, and her fingers yearn to run over the soft linens and pillows that may one day caress the skin of her baby.

“Maybe later.” Finn nods sympathetically. “He’s waiting.”

With an outstretched arm, he gestures to the door on the right. Biting her lip, she walks over, each step heavy on the plush carpet under her feet. It’s only a few feet, but it feels like an eternity when she finally reaches the door and tentatively pokes her head in.

“Y-you wanted to see me?”

The Commander jumps up from his chair, his brown eyes wide. “Yes!” he blurts out enthusiastically. “That is, yes, I wanted to see you.”

“Okay.” She edges into the room, fully aware of Finn’s gaze on the back of her head. “Well, here I am.”

The room is larger than she expected, almost as large as the dining room downstairs, and made significantly more imposing by the floor to ceiling panels of dark walnut on the walls. Windows are hidden behind long black drapes, and the floor is covered in an eclectic assortment of ornate woven rugs in various shades of faded red and blue. There’s furniture as well, worn but still lush and expensive looking, in the form of two wingback chairs along with the Commander’s messy desk.

But what really pulls her attention are the books. Shelves and shelves of books line the walls, the dark wood blending into the paneling and making it appear like the office itself is constructed out of books. Unlike those in the nursery, these have readily apparent titles along the spine, ranging from the artistic to the utilitarian, and even some on engine design, mechanics, history, music-

“You can go now.”

His voice is sharp and demanding, the voice of a Commander. For a second, Rey thinks he’s talking to her, and her body almost wilts out of relief, but of course that’s not the case. She turns back to the door and sees Finn waiting out in the shadows, conflict written in the lines on his face.

“Are you sure? Maybe you’ll need-”

“Go. And shut the door behind you.”

He nods, eyes wide and fixed on Rey, who nods back as well. She knows he’ll stay within earshot, just in case.

The door closes with a click, and the Commander visibly relaxes. He awkwardly eases his way around the desk and drags one of the wingback chairs to face his own chair. “Please. Have a seat.” Hand trembling slightly, he gestures to the chair. “Relax. You’re my guest.”

Rey slumps down into the chair, her muscles sighing with relief. He sits back behind the desk across from her and tent his fingers together, then apparently rethinks it and clasps his hands on his lap, fingers wrapped around his wrists. He unclasps and clasps his hands again while she watches, dread pooling in the pit of her stomach. The clock on the wall ticks the seconds.
Finally, he settles on holding his hands on his lap, left over right. “So,” he starts, “Did you have a good day?”

She swallows a lump that’s just crawled its way up her throat. “I-I’ve had worse, I suppose.”

“I’ve been concerned all day after seeing you this morning. You seemed-”

“I didn’t sleep well.” A lie, but it’s easier to maintain while they waltz around the truth, at least for now.

“I see. Have you not been getting what you need from the Marthas? I can-”

“No, everything’s fine. Maz and Harter have been more than accommodating.”

“Good to hear.” He pauses, chewing on his bottom lip for a few seconds before starting, “Last night-”

“It’s part of my place, my role in this household.” The words run into each other in a mess of syllables. She’s not even sure he’s understood what she’s said until he gives a small nod.

“That it is.” He pauses again as he formulates his response so methodically, Rey can almost see the gears turning. “But it doesn’t have to be like this. Do you understand?”

“I don’t think so.” Sweat blooms on her palms.

A small smile. “Like this. Like two strangers sitting across from each other.”

She tilts her head to side, face impassive even as her brain is screaming. “How could this be any different? We are two strangers sitting across from each other.”

He continues to smile through the small flinch that ghosts across his face. “Well, first of all, I would like to get to know you. I don’t know where you’re from or how you’ve ended up here.”

“Why do you need to know?” It comes out a bit harsher than she intended, but he seems unperturbed.

He crosses his arms across his chest as he leans against an armrest. “I don’t need to know, but I would like to know who-” Another bite on his bottom lip to stem the flow. “-who lives in my house. I would like to know everyone who lives here,” he finishes, lamely.

“You mean that the Centre didn’t give you a little print out on me when I was assigned here?”

“A half sheet of paper can hardly give a good impression. I’ve already seen so much more of you than what was disclosed in your file.”

The innuendo hits him a second too late, and his face flames tomato red. Incensed, Rey looks away, her eyes fixed on a collection of postmodern poetry. She takes in a couple of deep breaths, then comments, “To be honest, there’s not much more to it. I was left out on the streets when I was a child. I have no memory of my parents or the home I first grew up in.”

“That was all outlined, in more or less words.” He places his hand on the desk, fingers inches from her elbow. “I meant to ask what your interests are. What do you find enjoyable or exciting?”

“Up until recently, most of my time was spent staying alive.” She shrugs, burying her most secret memories like treasures. He doesn’t need to know, doesn’t deserve to know those things about her, the things that make her who she is. He doesn’t get to know her like that.
“And now?”

“And now it’s spent sitting on a bed and fetching groceries. It’s hardly interesting.” A thought crosses her mind, so she leans back and runs with it. “What do you do?”

Face alight, he leans forward in his chair and lays his hands flat on the desk. “You would think it’s boring, being pulled from the front, but it’s not. There’s plenty to do. I work on strategies, projects, and new initiatives, plan training exercises, and even categorize new recruits.”

“How much of this work involves sitting behind a desk?”

His cheery expression falters. “Most of it, but I enjoy it.”

“You don’t miss the front? All the excitement of the battles?”

He scoffs. “It was enjoyable, but I like being closer to home.”

“So you don’t miss it at all?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“So you do miss parts of it? What do you miss?”

“Ofren.” His voice is tinged with annoyance, but his amusement is evident in the corner of his mouth. “That’s confidential, and you know it.”

He loves it, this little push-pull game of banter. She can tell by the way his fingers tap on the desktop and the smoothness of his normally furrowed brow, as well as the fact that she’s still allowed to be in this sanctum, lounging in his wingback chair instead of being banished back to her spartan bedroom.

Never content, she pushes further. “But who would I tell?” she wonders. “I have no friends, and no way of communicating anything.”

“I’m sure you don’t.” The same wry smile makes his lips twitch. “I’m sure that Mayday hasn’t tried to contact you, and I’m more sure that they haven’t succeeded in converting you to one of their pitiful resistance cells.”

His brown eyes are met with steely hazel. “I don’t know what you’re implying, but I assure you that I’m-”

“It’s not like it would make a difference either way.” His face falls. “The very little privileged information I have access to would do absolutely nothing to advance any rebellion. Father ensures that.”

Where one opportunity closes, another opens. “You don’t think he trusts you?”

He lets out a gust of air that’s half sigh, half snort. “I know he doesn’t trust me. He’s always testing me, and sending people to watch me.”

He pauses and his gaze flicks to the door.

She doesn’t understand, not at first. Then the cold realization washes over her and she recoils, viscerally, pushing herself into the tufted leather until it refuses to yield. Her brain restarts its heavy drumbeat against her skull, and her palms bloom with a fresh sheen of sweat. “N-no,” she stutters. “Don’t pretend to be surprised. He’s a very bad actor.”
Lies, lies, her mind hisses, but there’s too many lies, the strata of deception and illusion stacked high in this house. Sure, she suspected Finn, at least initially, but this new assertion juxtaposed with the source is preposterous. How could kindness bloom from deception, and how could honesty bloom from such a monster?

“You’re lying.” She can’t help it, she’s shaking so much that her teeth have started chattering together. “He’s shown me nothing but honesty and respect.”

The Commander is frozen in his chair, eyes darting from her twisted face to her fidgeting fingers. Discomfort radiates from him; clearly his military training never prepared him for the sight of his Handmaid going to pieces in his office. He clears his throat. “You didn’t honestly think that-?”

“That what?” She lurches forward, banging a fist on the desktop with barely restrained force. “That someone was actually being kind to me?”

“It’s not about that!” He’s chewing on his cheek in frustration, fingers tapping a nervous beat only inches away from hers. “It’s about duty and loyalty, and where those loyalties lie. I’m not saying that he’s not kind to you, or that anyone here isn’t kind to you. But you’ve got to understand that there’s a difference between what people do, and who people are. Don’t think for a second that anyone in this house is without their secrets.”

She lets out a harsh bark of laughter. “Then why should I trust you?”

“I’m not asking you to trust me!”

“Well, it sure sounds like you are!” She pushes herself back from the desk again, back into the leather chair, which squeaks in protest. “Why does it matter who I trust? It’s not going to make much of a difference for me now. It’s not like things can get much worse.”

Again, she’s startled by her own frankness, how the words travel from her heart directly out her mouth without any oversight. She’s hit by flashes of warning spoon fed to her by the Aunts at the Centre. They taught that the tongue was a “world of evil among the parts of the body” and that many Handmaids found themselves severely punished for speaking out against a Commander or a Wife, sometimes even killed.

And here she sits, her tongue running away from her, and all the Commander can do is stare, pointedly at her lips, as if the mere sight of a lesser human chastising him were enough to strike him mute.

“May I leave now?”

Her boldness is rewarded by a quick flick of the wrist towards the doorway. His eyes have gone slightly glassy and unfocused, and are now staring down at the desk as if it held the secrets of the galaxy in its smooth, varnished top. Not willing to wait and see whether he’d change his mind, Rey jumps up from the chair and scoots out the office door without giving him a backward glance.

Finn is waiting outside the second door. Wordlessly, he asks if she’s okay with a raise of his brows. She nods, and says nothing in return, and together they travel down the staircase back to familiar territory.

Her mind is reeling; either the Commander is lying and Finn and the Marthas are honest and loyal with their kindness, or he’s telling the truth and they aren’t. Her instincts, so quick to suspect her housemates back when her suspicions were her own, are begging her to doubt this monster, this man who pretends to peddle honesty while violating her very being.
But there’s something about the tension in his face, the way his eyes pleaded with desperation for her to merely consider his words, that makes her doubt her own doubt.
“He just wanted to talk?” Harter’s facial expression teeters between horrified and ecstatic. “Really?”

Rey shrugs, her bottom firmly planted on the kitchen counter and her legs swinging aimlessly back and forth. “Yeah, he just wanted to talk...about me. Said he wants to get to know me.”

Maz shakes her head as she tests the temperature of tap water against the inside of her wrist. “It’s not unheard of,” she muses. “But it seems highly unlikely, given the nature of your previous engagement.”

“Oh, come on, Maz,” Harter tsks. “That can’t honestly be all he’s after?”

“And why not?” The other woman empties a cup of water into the bowl containing the yeast, and swirls it around for a few seconds before elaborating. “It’s not like he has anyone else to talk to. I mean, have you ever heard more than two words at a time out of that overgrown salt shaker of a Wife?”

“But a Handmaid?” Surely he can at least confide in his colleagues?”

“I don’t think he trusts them.” Rey shrugs. “He mentioned that he thinks his father is spying on him. He thinks-he thinks everyone could be a spy.”

Harter chuckles. “Even us?”

Rey gives her a small smile. “Especially you two. Really, I don’t think he trusts anyone.”

“He trusts you.”

Maz’s words hang in the cool morning air of the kitchen. This early, the house is a haven for the tiny noises that normally go unperceived, the slight snores from Finn’s room, rustling leaves, the small click clicking of the hot water tank engaging. All of these sounds, yet the only thing Rey can truly hear is the rush of blood in her ears as she recalls last night’s events over and over again.

She drops her eyes down to the floor, her fingers gripping into the counter. Even though she’s staring at the ground, she can still feel Harter’s pointed stare on her scalp. “I can’t trust that he’s not lying to me.”

“And why would he do that?” Harter asks. “What does he gain from lying to you? Especially compared to what you could gain from earning his trust.”

Maz is elbow deep in her bowl of dough, yet she still manages to give her fellow Martha a disappointed glance. “That’s probably not something Ofren’s comfortable doing. I mean, consider the situation she’s in.”
“I am considering it.” Harter pauses her persistent vegetable peeling for a moment, and faces Rey. “I know this isn’t the most pleasant of prospects, and I know the last thing you want to do is spend more time with that man. But if he trusts you—”

“I don’t know that he does.”

“But if he does,” she persists. “It’s a terrible thing for me to suggest, I know it is, but it could work out well for you. You could discover information—”

“Who would I tell?” Rey snorts with frustration. “The reason he trusts me, if he does, is because I have no connections.”

“Let us worry about that.”

She lets out a breathless chuckle. “Oh, so you are spies!”

“I never said that.” Maz’s voice is low and deathly serious. “You take care of yourself, girl, and if you do find out anything, we’ll take it from there. But don’t put yourself in danger, and don’t do anything you’re not comfortable doing. It’s not worth losing yourself.”

The house creaks and groans a bit too loud to just be the regular seasonal squeaks. Rey hops of the counter, just in case, and pads over to the hallways.

“That’ll be him,” Harter nods. “God bless these old buildings and their sensitive joists.”

“Not that he’s ever been able to sneak up on us,” Maz adds. “The lumbering brute.”

There’s footsteps against the staircase. Heart pounding, Rey darts through the doorway to the hallway and presses herself against the wall. There’s a moment or two punctuated only by the methodical slapping sound of Maz kneading bread dough, and then a deep voice rumbles “Good morning.”

Some garbled replies, indiscernible. There’s heavy footsteps on squeaky wood, then a slight rustle.

“Maz, if you could-?”

“And where is that going to go, in the porridge?” Her tone is teasing with only a hint of annoyance.

“Uh no, I guess not. I thought we had some more fruit or something.”

“We only had the package you picked up yesterday,” Harter says. “It’s just regular porridge and tinned peaches today.”

Rey smushes her face up to the wallpaper, willing herself to catch his barely mumbled response.

“Do you think she liked them? Should I get more?”

Her mouth waters involuntarily when she remembers the luscious, juicy berries from yesterday morning, even though they were tainted by the rest of the day’s activities. It’s strange; she’s never seen anything like the mystery berries at the market, even when she and Ofhux have left early in the morning to pick up meat. Even days with fresh shipments only bring pink and red apples, at best. As well, she’s never seen a Commander anywhere near the market, as it’s purely the woman’s domain.

“I think she liked them quite a bit. But maybe...maybe something different? If you have the time.”

“Of course! It’ll take me less than twenty minutes, and she gets her breakfast at-?”
Maz’s gravelly voice responds. “Oh-seven-hundred.”

The heavy footsteps retreat away from the kitchen, stopping at the coat closet. Rey lets out the breath she’d been holding and dashes up the hallway stairwell two steps at a time. She makes it to her bedroom window just in time to see the Commander, clad in a black wool overcoat, open the front gate and turn left down the sidewalk.

She sits and stares at the sunrise until he returns back up the walkway, a small package clutched in his hand. When her breakfast is delivered to her door a few minutes later, the plain porridge is accompanied by a bowl half full of ruby red seeds that burst with rich juice when she chews them.

And at the bottom of the bowl, curled up in a protective coil, lies another scroll of paper, this one slightly thicker than the last.

*I’m sorry. Please let me make it up to you. Same time tomorrow?*

She takes another small handful of glistening seeds and tosses them into her mouth. Their flavour is progressively more and more bitter with each bite, but it’s still intriguing enough that she can’t seem to stop.

*

Her head is loathe to wear the hood again, after tasting a few brief hours of freedom. Her temples are throbbing, and the Wife keeps the house so warm now, Rey’s fairly certain she’s constantly sweating, even without another layer atop her head.

Still, even though it’s meant to make her faceless and nameless, it also gives her a measure of protection, or at least it seems like it does. Under the hood, she’s modest, obedient, the perfect submissive Handmaid just doing what she’s told.

So she tugs it on, along with her house slippers. She even debates bringing her gloves, but ends up dismissing the thought as absurd. As calm and collected as possible, she slips down the stairs, through the hall, dining room, and kitchen, then begins the trek up the stairs, pausing only to nod at Finn, who’s making his way outside for his nightly rounds.

He frowns. “Don’t tell me he-”

She presses a finger to her lips, then gives him a look she hopes is a smile, but is probably more of a grimace. He fumes, his eyes darting between her and the door.

Finally, his duty wins out, but he cautions, “if he tries anything, scream as loud as you can.”

“I will, I promise,” she whispers back, then continues to climb the steps. She hears the click of the front door closing behind her.

The Commander is seated behind his desk when she enters the office. He’s engrossed with a stack of papers, his left hand playing with a pen and his chin rested in the palm of his right. The floor squeaks when she enters, and he straightens up abruptly.

“Ofren. Thank you for coming.”

“Thank you for the fruit.” Gingerly, she sits down in the same wingback chair as two nights ago, relishing its plushness. “The Wife is out again tonight?”

He leans back in his own chair, the hint of a smile beginning on his lips. “Yes.”
“She keeps busy.”

“That she does.” The smile grows a bit wider.

“Why does she never have anyone over at the house? It seems like she’s always away, but never brings company over.”

It’s a bland enough question, met by an equally bland answer. “I’m not sure, to be honest.”

Rey resists the urge to roll her eyes. “Yeah,” she mutters, “I’m so sure of that.”

“Sure of what?” the Commander challenges, his face transforming from politely intrigued to entranced in three seconds flat. “That I’m not sure?”

“That you’re being honest,” she counters. “Isn’t that against your whole mantra? To ‘trust no one’?”

He smirks. “Now you’re learning.”

“Oh, so you fancy yourself a teacher now?”

“Of sorts.” He runs a hand through his thick black hair, mussing it from it’s gelled military precision. “I propose a deal, Ofren. Something that will help us get to know each other.”

She counters his intense stare with her own. “What kind of deal?”

“Honesty. A trade of honesty. I ask you a question, and in turn you ask me a question.”

“Ha! What kind of a deal is that? How will I know you’re telling the truth?”

He has the dignity to look very slightly offended. “I give you my word, which I guarantee is just as good as your own, if not better.”

_The word of a lying, murdering rapist._ How much less could it be worth to her? Still, she agrees. “Fine. A question for a question. You ask first.”

He grins, full on, no cunning or malice in his eyes. It’s more crooked that she had imagined. “Thank you.”

“Don’t let it go to your head. Now ask your question.”

“What’s one thing you enjoy?”

She frowns. Her palms have gone sticky again, a byproduct of being in his presence, it would seem. “That’s your question?”

“My first one.”

A thousand things fly through her head at breakneck speed. They range from the obtuse yet honest (freedom, bodily agency, less restrictive clothing) to benign, flat out lies (praying, fetching groceries, submitting to the monthly act of intercourse to further the species). She doesn’t want to bare her soul, but at the same time she has the sneaking suspicion that if she lies, he will somehow know.

She settles on something true, if not specific. “I enjoy fixing things.”

“Fixing things?”
“Yeah. It’s a hobby of mine. Back when I lived—back before, I used to find piles of forbidden goods, burn piles, and I would dig through the rubble to find old electronics, things to eat, books…”

Her voice trails off. She examines his face for any signs of outrage, but if anything he just looks even more fascinated, so she continues, “There would be a hard crust of charred things— I think the Guardians in charge of the cleansing of forbidden goods would assume that they had destroyed everything, purified everything, but without fail, whenever I dug underneath that crust I would find treasures.”

“And you would always find something?” he wonders. “In every garbage pile?”

She nods. “Every last one. There was always something worth saving after they were through with it.”

“Wow.”

There’s silence for a minute and, for that minute, the Commander stares unabashedly at her, as if he’s dissecting her with his eyes. Strangely, it’s not invasive; if anything, Rey feels like he’s assessing what she’s said and applying it to the person in front of him, constructing a more three dimensional version of the Handmaid known as Ofren.

Seemingly satisfied, he clears his throat and says, “Now you.”

“Now?” Her brain starts spinning again. “I don’t even know what to ask,” she admits, because of course she doesn’t know. She has a million questions but, even though he’s given his word, she still can’t trust that any of them will be answered. After all, what purpose would it serve for a man in a black uniform, to be honest with a woman in scarlet?

It slips out before she has time to over-analyze the question. “What do you want from me?”

He stills, his eyes going soft and hands clenching in the desk. “What do I want from you?” he repeats. “Many things, to be honest. I want—I want…I want you to call me by my name, when we’re alone at least.”

Rey’s mouth goes dry. “Your name?”

“Yes.” He swallows, then nervously adds, “Kylo.”

It’s an objectively small request that proves to be a big hurdle in Rey’s brain. He’s the Commander, that’s who he is in their household. He’s the Commander and she’s the Handmaid, and the roles that stem from that are just the parts they play. It’s as if he’s asking her to take him shopping or to one of her monthly doctor’s appointments, to consider him as a colleague instead of her jailer.

“I don’t know that I’ve ever called you anything before,” she observes.

“Well, what do you call me when you talk about me with the Marthas?”

She narrows her eyes. “Who says I talk about you with anyone?”

“So you don’t?”

“That’s not what I said.”

He laughs as if she’s told an extremely witty joke. The lines around his eyes crease and a dimple emerges in his cheek, making him look less tired and sallow. “No one has told me anything about
you, or what you say or do in your spare time. Like I said before, I don’t warrant being privy to any sort of government surveillance projects.”

Rey tilts her head to the side. “You’re admitting that the government has all of us under surveillance?”

“You would have to be a fool to believe that there isn’t some level of listening in place throughout most of Gilead.” He scans the walls of his office, as if searching for some microscopic camera or microphone. “Where it’s radio or telephone scanning, or spies, somebody is always watching.”

“Are they watching you right now?” She points to where his gaze is fixated, to a top shelf of one of his bookcases directly behind her. “Are they listening right now?”

“No, not listening.” He looks back down at her. “I do some minorly sensitive work in here, so my father had a jamming device installed in that bookshelf to prevent anyone from broadcasting footage or audio of this room. Hence the need for physical spies in the house, just to ensure that everything is aligned.”

“What are they watching for?” Her voice is alight with curiosity.

“Hold on, that’s your fifth question in a row,” he chastises. “Let me catch my breath for a bit.”

Rey sits up straighter. She’d been so caught up in the intrigue that she’d forgotten his little game. That’s all it is to him, she realizes, just a game to pass the time. Maybe that’s all she is as well. Just a toy to play with while his wife is out of the house. It makes perfect sense.

Or maybe he’s lonely. Maybe he’s just as paranoid as he sounds sometimes, and doesn’t have anyone to vent to, to unload his feelings and frustrations on to. Either way, for the time being, it’s just words.

“Hurry up and ask your questions then,” she responds, leaning up against his desk and facing him head on. “You’re falling behind... Kylo .”

*

Another day, another breakfast, another bowl of new food to enjoy. Rey eats slices of red, heart shaped berries, round blue berries, and berries that look like the first she had, only the deepest purple colour. And not just berries too, some days bring slices of fresh peach, or another fruit that’s like the peach, only smaller and darker.

Every day also brings a new slip of paper furled up at the bottom of the bowl.

I can’t wait to hear the end of the story of you and the toaster. Friday 7:30 PM?

That Friday, she mimes the shocked expression she wore when she was fifteen and electrocuted himself, and he laughs so hard he snorts.

I hope you enjoyed the kiwi. I’ll tell you where it’s from next time we meet. Tuesday 9 PM?

On Tuesday, he sketches a bird that’s named for the fruit (or maybe it’s the other way around?) and she imagines what it would be like to one day have a pet.

I found a box of old pictures of myself. Hopefully you don’t die laughing. Friday 7 PM?

Next Friday finds her rendered speechless by a photo of him in a green uniform, with pimples on his
face and a shaved head. He coughs, and replaces it with one of him tripping at his own wedding, claiming it’s less embarrassing.

**Sunday 10:30 PM? I’ve found something for you.**

It’s late, but she has no mechanism to refuse his requests, and doesn’t know what he’ll do if he’s stood up. Having no clock in her room, it’s hard for her to discern the exact time, so she waits until Finn leaves for his nightly rounds and then taps the moments out with her fingers on her bedspread.

She’s forgone the bonnet this time. Sighing, she runs her hand through her hair, relishing the sensation of the cool night air against her scalp. *It's time*, she reasons, to no one but herself. Time for what, she’s not sure.

It is apt though. Like a snake shedding it’s skin, every time they meet, Kylo is a little less put together, whether it’s an undone button or a loose tie. Last time he even sat across from her on the second wingback chair, passing a box of photos back and forth with his jacket tossed on his desk. Maybe, like her, he both craves and resents the protective garments they have to wear. Maybe he hates advertising his status as much as she hates advertising hers?

She dismisses the thought almost immediately. *Unlikely*. She sees the way Commanders are treated outside of this household. They’re heroes of the Faith, worthy of every honour and deference possible. Who wouldn’t want to live in that kind of light?

She doesn’t realise that she’s dozing off until she wakes with a start. The sharp close of the front door echoes up the staircase, igniting her to frantically dart up off the bed, down the stairs, and through the hall, even forgetting her slippers in her hurry.

The grandfather clock indicates it’s past 10:45. Finn’s still taking off his coat when she almost runs square into him on her way through the foyer.

“Ofren!” he splutters. “You forgot your-.” He gestures to his cap.

“Nope, didn’t forget,” she pants, already scrambling on the stairs in her sock feet.

“You sure?” he calls up after her. “Maybe your slippers then?”

“Maybe!”

By the time she reaches Kylo’s office, she’s a gasping, shoeless mess, with her hair flying all over the place and a hint of sweat soaking into the armpits of her gown. Still a bit dopey from her accidental nap, it takes her a second to notice that there’s something crucial missing from the office.

“Kylo?” she calls out, softly, in the off chance that he may have also accidentally fallen asleep on the floor somewhere.

The room is silent. Chewing her lip, she backs out of the doorway and turns to her left to face the middle door. She wants to knock, but her hand is frozen to her side and her blood runs cold.

She can’t touch that door. Can’t run the risk that it might open, that she might see that sterile room with its overstuffed bed and gold plated chandelier. Can’t see his black uniform against the bedroom walls, can’t see his face alight with soft curiosity, while his leather gloved fingers grip a whitewashed bedpost.

Her stomach lurches. “K-kylo?” she calls out, a bit louder than last time. Her voice cracks, and she *hates* it.
There’s a rustle from behind the middle door, but no response. Gut pounding and face oddly cold, she tiptoes back into the office and all but falls into the wingback chair, willing her body to calm down.

There’s a razor thin crack forming in the little compartments in her mind, the compartments containing all of the broken parts of herself she’s not yet ready to address. Blood oozes through the fissure, her blood and the blood of every woman gowned in red like her. She tries to shift the blame in her mind; the Marthas put her up to this, after all, and even Ofhux thought it was a good idea. “Better in his office then up there,” she had mused, her eyes trailing the span of the concrete Wall.

But playing house was never in her plan, and this? Being broken and blubbery outside his bedroom? This is him winning, she warns herself as she clutches her arms around her chest. This is him making you weak.

The adrenaline leaves her body like a gust of wind. She presses her face into the soft leather and takes in a couple of deep, calming breaths. Her stomach is feeling a bit better, mending from the stress just like the walls she’s built around herself.

Finally able to focus on something other than her shaking body, her eyes fall on a pile of books piled on top of the desk, stacked perfectly straight with the spines facing away from her. Curious, Rey lifts the top book from the pile and examines it. It’s very heavy, with a glossy cover that reads *Introduction to Automobile Engineering* in blocky text and has a picture of several gears on it. She opens the book, which is so big she has to prop it up on her lap, and drinks in the first page she sees. It’s a diagram of what appears to be an engine, slightly different from what she’s seen before, but still mostly familiar.

She spins around the stack of books so she can read their spines. *Statics and Dynamics, Calculus, Thermodynamics, Physics, Kinematics*. Each word is unfamiliar yet enthralling, like magical spells that she’s about to learn. Craning her neck, she looks around the room at the walls of shelves, lined with books of every size and colour. Sure, she’s caught a word or two before, but she hadn’t considered until now the raw, untapped potential she’s been sitting amongst for almost two weeks.

Heart fluttering with anticipation, she runs her finger against the barely raised lines of ink in the book on her lap, and starts reading.

* 

For the second time that night, she jolts awake from a bout of unexpected sleep. This time though, instead of waking up on her well worn bedspread, she’s enveloped in surprisingly soft wool, strong arms, and the grudgingly familiar scent of cologne and gunpowder.

Kylo slows, but doesn’t still, when he feels her wiggle in his grip. “Just sit tight, Ofren, I’m almost there,” he breathes, his breath hot against her hair.

Her face is wedged against his shoulder and it’s still dark, so she can’t quite figure out exactly where she is. For a heart-stopping moment, she imagines that he’s kidnapped her for his own nefarious purposes, but then he steps sideways and she hears the groan of squeaky old stairs under his feet.

“This obviously hasn’t been repaired in ages,” he grumbles to himself.

Her doorway is so narrow that he has to stay sideways to make his way through it. Only once they’re inside does he let her down onto her bed. She expects him to just leave her there, but instead he stands and looks around awkwardly as she regains her bearings and tries to knead the crick out of her neck.
“Sorry I didn’t tidy up. I wasn’t expecting visitors,” she blurts out, then winces. Her better judgement is obviously still asleep.

“I’ve never been up here,” he admits. “When we were assigned to this house, Phasma told me that this area was none of my concern.”

“So you never made it up here?” Rey frowns. “Weren’t you the least bit curious?”

He cracks a small smile that’s barely perceivable in the low light. “Not all of us are as curious as you, Ofren.”

“I guess not.” She turns away and focuses on the streetlamps still lit outside of her window. “What time is it?”

“Just before five,” he answers. “I was heading out for work when I noticed you asleep in my office. Figured you wouldn’t want Phasma to find you there.”

“I suppose not.” She faces him again, takes in his now slightly wrinkled dress uniform trimmed with ribbons, medals, and his customary gun and silver handled knife. She’d been scared the first few times she saw them, but now she knows they’re mostly for show, at least off the front lines. “Big day at work?”

“You could say that. Big day for everyone.” The barest sliver of a grimace flits over his face before he can temper it.

“Oh?”

His expressive face is his worst weakness. She can see him hesitate for a second before his brow unfurls and he admits with resigned honesty, “There’s Salvagings tomorrow, with a Particicution. Several, in fact. One of them is a woman.”

“A woman?”

“A Handmaid.”

Ofhux’s face flashes through her mind. “But why-?”

“She was pregnant.” He looks away, gaze fixed on the doorway. “With twins. She did it herself.”

His sparse words are more than explicit enough. Rey lets out a nervous breath and looks down at her hands folded neatly in her lap. “I see.”

Murdering a child, even a child that’s not yet been born, is punishable by Particicution. Murdering two children is unfathomable. Normally there’s some man involved, usually a doctor, that takes the fall while the woman is either maimed or hanged. But for a Handmaid to it to herself...her fate was sealed.

“How was it done?”

He looks over at her, his eyes dark. “I can’t—”

“Kylo.”

His face crumples. “The Wife left her knitting needles out in the parlour.”

Rey’s belly cramps sympathetically and she winces.
Slowly, quietly, Kylo kneels down next to her. “You don’t have to go if you don’t want to,” he says, his expression soft. “My father is an influential man in the government. You just say your name, and no one will force you to attend.”

It’s tempting, but it would do her no good to cash in on his charity before she truly needs it. “No, it’s fine,” she sighs. “It’s just another unpleasant part of life, I suppose.”

“Unpleasant but necessary,” he asserts. He pauses, brow furrowing for a moment before he asks, “May I touch you?”

And with that, adrenaline rushes back into her veins, setting her skin alight and her nerves afire. She burrows her now-clammy hands into her gown and responds, “Why?”

“I just-” He struggles with the glut of words at his disposal. “I just need to feel you. To remind myself that you’re here, and you’re real. That this is all happening.”

She wants to ask him why he needs to touch her now, in her room of all places. Why can he not wait the two weeks until she’s back in his bedroom, on her back with her skirts hiked up around her thighs? The question is on her lips, yet she can’t bring herself to speak it, because she knows why he needs this, because she needs this too, Maybe not for the same reasons as him, but their goal is ultimately the same.

So she reaches out and grasps his large hand in her smaller one, gripping it like a lifeline. He makes a choking sound at the skin to skin contact and gently squeezes back, his large thumb rubbing lazy circles into the back of her hand while his cheeks redden. In turn, she grips him harder, steadier, all while her hazel eyes match the intensity of his stare. It’s not sexual at all, in fact it’s barely platonic, however the restraint evident as his hand dwarfs hers feels almost like a promise.

It’s a promise that’s still on her mind when she wakes barely two hours later. Harter’s at the door with the news of the Salvagings, and Rey does her best to mime surprise and curiosity as the other woman loiters in her doorway.

“So,” Harter starts her next topic with her typical lack of subtlety. “Do you need a change of sheets this morning?”

Rey’s eyes go wide. Kylo had left her room shortly after five, before the Marthas typically woke up in the morning, but maybe there was additional baking, or chores? “N-no, of course not, why would I?” she babbles.

Harter feigns surprise. “I see. Well, I was just wondering...considering the time of the month, I was interested in whether a certain visitor had arrived.”

A visit- “Oh that?” Rey looks down at her bedsheets, which are spotless. As well, she doesn’t feel any wetness between her legs. She’s never been particularly good at tracking her cycle, which was absent or sporadic before she was brought in to be a Handmaid, however in her new role her menstruation, or lack thereof, is now the hottest topic in the household. “No, I don’t think it has.”

Harter is smiling now, and her foot is tapping excitedly against the floor. “Well, it’s still early, so I don’t think a test is necessary. You are quite young, so it would make sense that it would take a bit easier than normal.” Her eyes flick up to the ceiling. “Praise be.”

“Praise be,” Rey echoes.

Once the other woman has left, she quickly closes the door and pulls down her underwear. It’s as pure white as her sheets. Now that she thinks of it, her breasts have been feeling a bit sore as well,
and she’s been barely able to keep her eyes open lately, even with plenty of sleep.

She rides to the Salvaging in a daze, barely acknowledging Ofhux when the other woman kneels down next to her. It’s doesn’t stop her defiant friend, who seems very convinced that Rey needs to know the alleged crimes of every person brought before them today.

“They want them to be secret, because there’s no power in that,” she whispers. “But one Wife was caught trying to help her Handmaid escape. I don’t think she’s even connected to the Rebellion; she was just helping out of the goodness of her heart.”

Rey catches a glimpse of Phasma, and a chill runs down her spine. “How do you know this?”

“People talk. I heard there’s a Commander who is being executed as well, for the same crime. And-” Ofhux pauses for effect, “- his Handmaid is pregnant.”

“She’s pregnant and he tried to help her escape?” The concept is almost unbelievable. She can feel her blood pounding in her ears. “Why?”

Ofhux is about to respond, but the amplified voice of an unnamed Aunt cuts her off.

The Salvaging begins with a recitation of ritualistic words that are mostly lost to Rey, followed by the parading of the criminals onto the field, their crimes left a mystery. There’s five of them, one for each of the fingers on each Handmaid’s hand that grip the rope so tightly, the rope that’s attached to the noose around each woman’s neck.

Rey watches them sway slightly from their leftover momentum, and feels nothing. More accurately, her feelings about the situation are packed away, sequestered behind another barrier being constructed in her brain. All she can focus on are Ofhux’s words, of the story of the Commander who cared enough for his Handmaid that he would help her escape. It tugs at her and, unconsciously, she rests a hand on her flat belly.

There’s a tension in the air when the last criminal is brought out, still clothed in her scarlet robes. The other Handmaids bristle as one, readying their rage like a weapon and moving together like a monstrous beast. The crime of self-inflicted abortion is announced, and the jaws of the beast snap.

Fingers tear into red fabric, clawing it away in chunks, then tear into flesh, bruising and biting. There’s tears in the eyes of almost every woman in the crowd; tears for the poor lost babies, of course, but also tears for their own fruitless wombs. Spurned by rage and jealousy, they carve their grief into the body of their fallen comrade until the green of the field is stained with patches of blood.

“Hit her, Ofren.” Ofhux’s voice is in her ear, wet and breathy.

Rey, who has lingered on the edge of the crowd, looks over at her like she’s gone insane. Frowning, the other woman grabs her by the arm and drags both of them into the fray. “Just do it,” she says between gritted teeth. “She’s dead already, and if you don’t participate, you’ll die too.”

As if to prove her point, Ofhux grabs a large rock from the ground and hurls it at the criminal. It barely grazes her, however the other Handmaids let out a loud roar of rage and affirmation, grabbing their own rocks and hurling them at the body on the ground.

Rey bends over and takes a smooth stone. She passes it from one hand to the other, stalling for time then, with a small grunt of effort, she lobs in the direction of the woman. It wasn’t aimed well, and wasn’t thrown that hard, however somehow it’s Rey’s rock that lands squarely on the woman’s temple, cracking her skull.
The sickening sound echoes over the roar of the mob. Blood starts oozing down the bruised skin of her forehead, and the Handmaids scream in victory. Rey feels like her body is shrinking, shrinking, shrinking. She stares at her hands, then feels her body lurch with a deep, visceral pain that sends her hobbling to the bathroom.

Locking herself in a stall, she throws off her suffocating mass of scarlet fabric with shaking fingers as she gasps for air. Her abdomen cramps again, doubling her over from the pain and the wave of nausea that rolls through her gut like a tidal wave. All she can see is red, the red of her gown, the red running down the woman’s face, the red of Kylo’s flushed cheeks in her darkened bedroom. And finally, once her hands are steady enough to peel off the rest of her clothing, she finds the last traitorous drop: the dull red smear of blood she sees on her underwear, signalling the beginning of another monthly cycle.
Rey

Chapter Notes

TW: rape

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She doesn’t think she’s ever going to get used to the sensation of spreading her legs for strangers.

It’s a different doctor this time, an older one, who makes strange micro-expressions while he reads her chart off of the Compudoc. His eyebrow twitches. “Well, you’ve had an interesting life, haven’t you?” he comments with an arrogance that tells her that her input is not really necessary. “Let’s hope there wasn’t any permanent damage.”

“I was assured that there wasn’t.” Phasma’s icy voice filters through the curtain. “I never would have agreed to such an unconventional Handmaid if I had known she was spoiled.”

Rey chews her cheek and tries to relax as the doctor inserts his lubricated fingers, all while he and the Wife discuss her background as if she’s some sort of investment which, she supposes, she is.

“Well, it’s impossible to know from a couple of photos,” he muses. “Objectively, she’s much younger than many of the Handmaids available, so you wouldn’t have been wrong to assume that she would be the most fertile.”

“I thought that wasn’t normally the case?”

“It’s not, but it’s hard for us to look past youth and beauty as indicators of fertility. That is, after all, what the Lord intended them to be.” The doctor wiggles his fingers, and adds as an afterthought, “Praise be.”

“Praise be,” Phasma responds mechanically. “Youth and beauty indeed.”

The ride home is silent, as usual. Finn guides the car through pristine streets, past shrouds of red and flashes of green. Rey presses her face to the window, partially to take in the scenery she so rarely sees, and partially to get as far away from Phasma as possible. The other woman seems cool and collected, her typical demeanor, however Rey can feel the tension rolling off of her in waves.

“Leave us,” Phasma orders, once he’s parked the car in the driveway.

Finn frowns. “Sorry?”

“You heard me.” Her silvery gaze challenges his feigned ignorance. “I need to have a private chat with Ofren.”

Rey squirms, but says nothing. His warm eyes go narrow, suspiciously darting between the Wife and her subordinate. “Phasma, I don’t know what you’re trying to do here, but I don’t think it’ll be helpful for-”

“Don’t presume your place, Guardian,” she barks. “This household is my domain. I solely determine what is helpful and what isn’t. Now get out before I report you to my husband.”
Rey bites her tongue to prevent herself from pleading with him. She can’t be too familiar; he’s already risking his station and perhaps his life to stick up for her in the smallest way. To insinuate that they’re extremely comfortable with each other would ensure his death.

He knows this though, and reads her thoughts from her pained expression. “I’ll just be outside then,” he cautions. “Just in case you ladies need any assistance.”

Phasma is curt. “We won’t.”

The car door closes with a thud, leaving the two women in the back seat. Rey grips the edge of the leather cushion, forcing her body still as her mind races.

“What have you considered getting more sleep?”

There’s no concern in the Wife’s voice, only tense accusation. Rey raises her eyebrows and replies, “I’m not sure what you’re referring to.”

She looks away and shrugs. “I figured that you’re getting enough fruit in your diet, so the lack of success this month can’t be due to malnourishment. Therefore, it must be the long nights you’ve spent staying up with my husband.”

The air in the vehicle goes thin. A sheen of sweat breaks out on the back of Rey’s neck, and her vision blurs. “Again,” she says, strangling the tremors in her throat, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t play stupid with me, girl. I know what happens in this house when I’m gone, which is why I haven’t been gone lately. I know what game you’re trying to play, so let me make this clear: I will not be replaced.”

“What!” Rey gasps. “I never—why would I think that?”

Phasma lets out a cruel cackle. “Oh, I’m sure you haven’t.”

Her sarcasm is evident, but so is Rey’s open mouthed astonishment. “You’re mistaken, I—I never once imagined that I would, that I could, ever be—”

Phasma holds up a silencing finger, her lips also slightly parted, eyes questioning. “You honestly haven’t, have you?” Her nostrils flare, and she lowers her hand back to her lap while she shakes her head from side to side. “Oh Kylo…”

They sit in silence together, Rey under the solid realization that she cannot leave before she’s dismissed. Phasma’s accusation is ludicrous, the ramblings of a jealous Wife. Or are they? She flashes a sideways glance at the imposing woman next to her, who is still shaking her head slowly.

An airy laugh erupts from Phasma’s throat. “What an idiot!”

“What?” Rey blurts out. “Who is an idiot?”

“An idiot?” Rey blurs out. “Who is an idiot?”

“You know who. Kylo is a scared, stupid fool who thinks he can do this on his own terms. You must have caught the way he moons over you.” Phasma shrugs. “Naturally, I had assumed some machinations on your part, but of course you never even thought—but why would you? This life must be paradise compared to what you’re used to.”

Rey’s stomach twists.
“Oh my darling girl…” Phasma’s face is soft, her cheeks rosy with goodwill and lips curled into a smile, a reflection of death still glinting in her eyes. “Never forget- you’re a vessel, handpicked by his father because you’re young with a pretty face. If you do well here, you’ll be blessed with a comfortable life, safe in the knowledge that you have given the nation an unfathomable gift. Don’t you dare let his delusions of grandeur take that away from you.”

“I-I won’t.”

There’s no other acceptable answer. Phasma grins, then raps on the car window to signal Finn, who opens the door, leaving Rey alone in the back seat.

*

The morning of the ceremony, the Commander re-emerges from the piles of paperwork in his office. He looks tired, the levity of his work etched into the lines on his forehead and the papercuts running down the lengths of his fingers. Even his normally pressed uniform is covered in wrinkles.

Rey ducks behind the refrigerator when she sees him walk down the staircase, her heart thumping in her chest and her palms sweaty. She hasn’t met with him since the early morning of the Salvagings, and has only seen glimpses thereafter, tense encounters where she averts his gaze and darts to the other side of the room while he stares after her.

She can still recall the scent of his neck against her nose and the feeling of his pulse jittering against her cheek. She remembers how she woke in his arms, how different it felt to have him carry her. So tender, so safe; his strength used to protect her instead of-

“Blasted performance appraisals,” he grumbles over his breakfast to Phasma, who hums in response. “Five hundred Angels, and I can’t be spared one assistant to help me fill out the forms.”

“I would offer,” she muses. “Unfortunately…”

He snorts. “I appreciate the thought, however subversive it might be. Doesn’t make this any less of a waste of my time.”

“Because you’ve been so busy, of course.”

Rey rests her forehead against the fridge. She needs to get back to her room, needs to bathe and prepare herself for tonight, but she can’t leave, not now. Not without knowing.

Luckily, Phasma is always in the mood to persist. Her chair legs scrape against the wooden floor, then she hisses, “Don’t deny it, Kylo. Everyone knows. Why on Earth do you think Snoke gave you so much busywork to do in the first place? He knows where your mind is.”

“My mind is none of his business.”

A blatant cackle. “Such conviction. You barely believe your own lies.”

“Shut up,” he snaps like a petulant child. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“And you have no idea what you’re doing. What did you think would happen once you came home? We’re both here for a reason, you know that, and it’ll do you no good to think you can run away from it. Besides-” Phasma takes a slurp of milk from her cereal. “-I’m surprised you’re so grouchy today, considering what day it is.”

There’s the clink of a spoon falling into a porcelain bowl. The Commander’s voice lowers to barely a
whisper. “Know. Your. Place.”

“Ha!” Phasma will not be discouraged, especially not over her breakfast. “You’re a fool to think that your life will be anything but what Snoke wants it to be. It’s best to just sit back and enjoy it, if you can.” She snorts. “However knowing you, you’re probably going to spend the rest of your time making yourself miserable.”

*

The ceiling is such a pure shade of white, further highlighted by the golden chain of the chandelier and the deep blue curtains crowning the windows. Everything seems the same; the same room, same clothing, same stale readings and ritual, however the atmosphere is changed, charged somehow. Phasma’s body is stiffer behind her as they lay back against the pile of pillows. Her abdomen is taut under Rey’s bonnet and her clawed fingers dig into her palms even before they’ve begun.

Rey feels the difference as well, in the way the Commander reverently trails his fingers against the hem of her gown before pushing it up, how he rubs his hands against her thighs before bracing himself against her, and how hesitant he is as he eases himself into her, his body shaking with the effort of holding back.

She sees hints of his affection, obsession, scrawled over his face as he pursues her gaze. It’s in his touch, in the brush of his large hands against her shoulder as he thrusts, in and out, in and out. Is it always like this? she wonders. Even with love, is it still like this? Do the Wives lie on their backs as living sacrifices to carnality? Do the Jezebels twist their painted faces as officers writhe above them? Does she feel this way, when he’s with her?

Is this all there is?

He’s biting his lip and letting out small groats with each thrust. They draw her attention, and for a moment their eyes lock and his gaze melts instantly. She can’t watch him paint his version of devotion over this disgusting act, so she closes her eyes and takes in deep breaths between clenched teeth. Breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out.

He stops. “Ofren?” His voice is breathless, tinged with concern.

“She’s fine, keep going,” the Wife hisses above.

“She’s not fine; she looks like she’s in pain. Ofren?” He slips out, leaving her sore and burning. “Are you okay?”

No, she wants to say, no, I’m not okay. Her throat is clenching and her eyelids are still slammed shut. She’s trying to project herself far away, to save her psyche from the abuse her body is receiving, but it’s no use. Ofhux was right; the physical pain is not quite as bad as before, but the mental hurdles still loom high and unattainable.

Phasma has no time for dramatics. “Get on with it,” she snips, reaching over to shove the Commander’s shoulder. “If she’s in pain, the best you can do is make it fast.”

He lets out a huff of air. “Thanks, you’re being so helpful right now.”

“Well, it’s true. Stop trying to be a hero, and do your job.”

He pushes into Rey again, but it’s awkward and half-effectual. She can feel him going soft beneath her, no doubt reacting to his Wife’s criticism and her own winces of pain. Cracking her eyes open, she takes in his flushed face and is instantly transported back to her bedroom, back to him depositing
her onto her bed and stroking his fingers against her hand, before the Salvaging and everything that came after.

The thought rises, unbidden, to the forefront of her mind:

Would you die for me?

Of course not, but the romantic notion sparks something with her, something silly and anguished and deluded. Half-drunk with stress and the thrumming need to escape, she pushes her head back against Phasma’s lap, exposing the creamy expanse of her throat, and lets her mouth drop open with a soft “oh.”

The Commander stutters, falling out of his awkward rhythm into something more jittery and desperate. She swears she can see the second his pupils blow wide and dark, and she can definitely feel him instantly harden inside of her. Everything else falls away in that moment; there’s no room, no bed, and no ice cold Wife presiding, only two lonely souls trying to survive a world out of balance.

She sees him now, sees the scared little boy under his father’s shoe, sees the ineffectual commander launched from a pedestal of lies. “Kylo,” she breathes. She pulls her right hand out of the Wife’s ironclad grasp and reaches for his. Their fingers touch, and an honest spark flies between them.

“Oh, I’m--” he stammers, then screws his eyes shut and lets out a long groan. “Ofren.”

The spark is snuffed out before it can catch, plunging Rey back into darkness.

Ofren.

Phasma has gone taut behind her, and Rey can see the waves of disgust radiating off of the other woman’s face. Still, she hasn’t moved or shoved Rey off with impatience. Instead she sits, watching her husband’s heaving body and shuddering gasps, and waits.

His hair hangs in a black curtain over his face. His breath comes out in small pants, disturbing the sweaty whisps curling in his eyes. With his free hand, he reaches up and pushes his hair back, then rests it on his shoulder, pensive. His other hand is still wrapped in hers.

“Phasma,” he says, softly. “Could you leave us?”

“Leave you? With her?” Phasma laughs. “What for? What are you two going to do that hasn’t already been done?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“Oh, I think it is. Despite what you think, this Handmaid is my responsibility, not yours. Everything regarding her is my business.”

The tone of the room immediately shifts from tense and awkward to outright hostile. Rey takes a deep breath and wills herself still as the spouses once again bicker above her. At the Centre, Aunt Hannah used to maintain that ‘a gentle heart and docile spirit’ was the key to conception and Rey has no reason to think otherwise, so she tries to calm her throbbing heart. Despite her best efforts and tilted hips, she still feels some of the Commander’s spend dribble out from between her legs and onto the bedspread. She groans, defeated.

He’s bent over now, retrieving his pants from the ground one-handed. “If she’s your business, why don’t you spend any time with her? What are you doing to ensure that her time here is pleasant?”
Phasma’s chuckles are now tinged with brutality. “A lot less than what you’re doing, apparently. Or at least, what you think you’re doing.” She pulls out from under Rey, letting the other woman fall back onto the bed as she shifts to the side. “What do you think, Ofren?” she asks. “Do you find these monthly encounters as pleasant as my husband does?”

Rey stares wide eyed at the Wife’s face. It’s a strange angle to look up at; her face is more nostrils and chin from Rey’s current perspective, giving an impression of twisted mockery rather than bland beauty. She’s tempted to look over at the Commander to gauge the situation, but resists, as seeing his dark, round eyes could sway her from speaking the truth.

“I can’t speak to how he feels,” she admits. “I’m proud to contribute in any way I can to ensuring Gilead’s future prosperity—”

“What an answer!” Phasma jeers. “But that doesn’t answer my question. Do you gain pleasure from these dalliances? Do you quiver in anticipation for the Ceremony?”

Tears spring unbidded from Rey’s eyes. “N-no,” she breathes.

“When you writhe beneath my husband, like you just did, is it because you’re enjoying yourself, or do you do it to make him climax faster?”

Rey grits her teeth and shakes her head.

“Answer me.”

“T-the second, the second one.” Her voice trembles.

“Oh, my dear.” Phasma reaches over and strokes a freezing cold hand lightly over Rey’s cheek. “I should report you for your wantonness, but I just can’t. After all, I know what it’s like to try and make the most of an unpleasant situation.”

There’s a tug as the Commander pulls his hand from hers. His fingers are shaking as he yanks at the zipper of his pants and fastens the button. His face is red, and his lips are plush and raw from being persistently chewed. He’s averting his eyes, looking anywhere but at Rey’s helpless body spread over his bed, but that can’t hide the glistening tracks of moisture trailing down his cheeks.

“Thank you for this, Phasma,” he mutters. “It’s nice to know when I’m appreciated.”

He stalks out of the room without another look, and slams the door to his office behind him. The sound of cracking wood erupts through the stillness of the house.

Phasma looks over at Rey and rolls her eyes. “Between us girls, he’s a bit of a child, isn’t he?”

Mercifully, she doesn’t demand a response.

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Rey’s eyes are crusty the next morning, and her head is throbbing. Unlike the previous month, her sleep this time was full of nightmares, of looming black shapes, wrenched organs, and heart crushing loneliness.

There’s a bowl of fruit next to a plate of sugar encrusted pastries. Grapes, from the looks of it, big green grapes with thin skin and an amazing aroma. Impatiently, she dumps the bowl out onto the breakfast tray, fishes the slip of paper out from between the rolling globes, and unrolls it.
White hot rage, the likes of which she’s never felt before, courses through her veins. She’s never felt anger like this before, anger fuelled by her helplessness plus his betrayal of whatever understanding that what left unsaid between them.

Phasma’s words echo in her head, how he imagines something different. Imagines that Rey could somehow one day become his Wife, stand by his side and possibly love him, even after all of this. Even crueler still, the realization that this mockery may be the closest thing to love she’ll ever experience. She chokes, acid crawling up the edge of her throat, and crushes the slip of paper under her merciless fingers.

She feigns illness when Harter comes to collect the breakfast dishes. The older woman frowns when she sees the beautiful fruit and pastries abandoned on the tray, and rests her weathered hand to Rey’s forehead.

“You are running a bit hot,” she says to the echoing room, keeping up appearances despite their solitude. Her eyes tell a different story, one of understanding and compassion. “Maz and I can collect the groceries for the day. You just stay up here and rest.”

“Thank you,” Rey breathes.

“Of course. As you know, your health is our top priority.”

She watches out her window as the Wife, clad in a tailored dress and sky blue wool coat, climbs into the sleek black vehicle driven by Finn. The car turns left at the end of the driveway and speeds down the road. Minutes later, Maz and Harter emerge from the side entrance to meet up with Ofhux, whose head tilts with curiosity. After a moment of conversation, the three women turn right and head off towards the market.

The house is silent. Rey feels her shoulders start to relax, for the first time in hours. She’s not proud about crying herself to sleep last night, but she’s even less proud of the way she’d behaved, how she had fooled herself into thinking that there could ever be anything there, in the balance between her and the Commander. He could be kind, yes, and even thoughtful, but the disconnect between their time together and the Ceremony burns too brightly to be forgotten.

And where does she stand? As a fertile womb, like society wants her? As a docile house pet for the Wife? A companion for the Marthas? Someone for Finn to protect and take care of?

Or is she a fantasy for a broken man?

She wanders through the empty house, relishing the feeling of being by herself. It’s different than loneliness; she feels full and collected, where loneliness leaves her empty. After everything that’s happened to her, it’s a treat to at least feel somewhat independent, if only for a moment.

She trails her fingers over the bannister, and imagines the life this house used to live, the many families who used to live here. It’s been well maintained, however there’s still evidence of children sprinkled through the hallways and embossed into the rooms. A nick on a baseboard, a scrape of pencil on a door frame, so small yet so permanent. As she reaches the landing, she imagines a little boy with hazel eyes and shaggy black hair playing on the floor here, making engine noises with his mouth as he pushes toy vehicles through the thick carpet.

A distinctly masculine sigh whispers through the air, and she freezes.

He’s still here.
Her hand stills. Though he hasn’t spotted her, and can’t read her mind, she’s still embarrassed to be caught in her daydream, and even more disgusted that her feel had been unconsciously leading her directly to his office. Straightening her back, she turns around and plods back down the stairs, sticking close to the edge as always to avoid eliciting squeaks.

The oppressive looming of the house is back, now that she knows she’s not alone. The tick of the clock in the entry hall. The squeak of the floorboards. All fixtures in the household, passive yet mocking her as she retreats back to her cage.

*I will not fade away.*

She runs up to her bedroom and drives for her mattress. Frantic hands claw underneath the springs, grasping at her collection of forbidden letters until they’re all clutched in her hand. She empties her mind of her doubts, her fears, and instead marches purposefully back to the staircase, up the majestic steps, and straight into the Commander’s office, where he’s poring over performance reports with his fingers tangled in his hair.

He looks up. “Ofren!” he exclaims, a glint of hope in his eyes.

She meets him with a stony frown. “What *game* are you playing?”

He straightens up in his chair, and pushes his paperwork aside. “W-what game are you talking about? I’m not playing a game.”

With a shaking hand, she gestures to the ink-smudged slips. “What the *hell* are these, then?”

His cheeks flush. “I was—”

“Why do this?” She stomps over and dumps the handful of tiny scrolls on top of his desk. “Was it fun for you? Do you enjoy playing with your food?”

She roughly pulls the wingback chair away from his desk and throws herself into it. She crosses her arms, mostly as a defense, but also to hide her shaking hands.

The Commander gulps in a breath of air. “If you’re referring to what happened last night...I-it’s nothing personal.”

“Nothing *personal*? You’re hurting me, with your body, and your defence is that it’s nothing personal? You were *looking* at me as you-” She pauses for air, then clenches her teeth. “It’s personal to me.”

He latches on. “But it’s different now, between you and I, right? Better now?”

“Better? Better than what? You’re still *raping* me!”

His left eye twitches. “It’s the Ceremony, Ofren, it’s necessary.”

“Don’t you dare give me that!” Her jaw trembles. “It’s not part of the Ceremony for you to touch me the way you do, for you to *look* at me the way you do!”

“So you do notice me! I didn’t think that you did, after last night.”

“Oh, I notice you.” She’s balled her fingers into fists and shoved them under her arms to keep herself from lashing out. “I notice everything. I notice how you lure me in with false promises, but when the time comes, you won’t hesitate to hold me down and take me without consideration.”
He flinches as if she’s struck him. He was never the hard, impassive Commander she’d initially imagined. He was always too raw, too eager to connect, and now the chinks in his armor have become messy, gaping holes that she pries apart, mercilessly. “Do you think you’re doing the right thing?”

He looks down. “I’m doing my duty.”

“That’s not what I asked. Are you doing the right thing?”

He swallows. “It’s not right. I know that. I feel that, every time I-”

Her eyes flash with rage, and she clenches her fists, fighting back the urge to scream. “Then why do you do it? If you know it’s wrong, why don’t you stop?”

“Because they’ll kill us!” His lip trembles. “They’ll kill me, and kill you too. They’ll throw bags over our heads and stuff us into a van and hang our bodies off the Wall until they’re eaten by crows. They’ll break your arms and legs and wheel you around like a human incubator. Is that what you want?” His voice is rising steadily, echoing off the wood paneled walls with alarming intensity.

Chest heaving, she counters him. “Of course not! But that’s your choice to make, isn’t it?”

He shrinks back, chastened.

“I get no say in any of this; I don’t even get to choose whether or not I want to die because my womb is too important to leave in my hands. Hell, it’s the only reason I’m still here and not shoveling toxic waste in the colonies! But I suppose I should be thankful for that too?”

“What do you want me to say?” He grabs the slips of paper left on the desk and squeezes them in his fist. “I’m sorry? I’m so, so sorry. I never wanted this, I promise you! Father wanted me to take a handmaid three years ago, but I couldn’t do it! I re-enlisted so that I wouldn’t have to, and then on my way home, after three years of service, I find out that you’re here anyway!”

Her chair flies back with an obnoxious squawk as Rey leaps to her feet, her face burning and her chest heaving. “Well, I’m sorry I disturbed your well laid plans!”

He glares at her. “I didn’t mean that, and you know it.”

“I honestly don’t know what’s more insulting.” She paces the office in front of him, in an attempt to burn off some of the nervous energy thrumming through her veins. Her blood is thundering in her ears; she knows she’s gone too far, but she just can’t help herself, can’t help the words that keep pouring out from her lips. “Being treated like an embarrassment by your wife, being holed up in a room for days on end, or being raped every month by someone who’s too much of a coward to stop!”

He doesn’t respond, and instead drops the papers back onto the desk with a shaking hand. His eyes have gone glassy, but she doesn’t care.

“When you touch me, I want to die,” she hisses, stalking even closer. “I feel like I’m dying, but at the end of it all I’m just left sore and bruised and slimy, while you get to walk away and feel sorry for yourself.”

A choked sob escapes from his open mouth. “Ofren, I-”

Her eyes flash and, before she has time to stop herself, she’s on top of him, pressing her hand over his mouth. The flesh of his cheeks is soft and yielding under her fingers as she digs them in until they
meet his jawbone. It hurts; she can tell by the way he’s whimpering against her palm, but he doesn’t fight back. Instead his body goes slack, and his pleading eyes lock onto hers.

She looks away, staring at the space directly above his head instead. “My name-” she says between her clenched teeth. “- is Rey.”

Her skin is crawling, muscles aching; her brain is screaming, all coherent thought forgotten. She can feel her hand starting to cramp as it squeezes angry red bruises into his cheeks. Kylo’s panting against her hand is matched by her own gasping breaths, and together they spell out the seconds punctuated by the persistent ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner.

Something warm brushes her other hand, which lies limp and forgotten against her side. She’s about to dig her fingers into his eye sockets out of panic until she feels his fingers slide something smooth and cold into her palm.

It’s his knife.

Her fingers close around the filigreed handle and then, only then, does she meet his unwavering gaze. His eyes are resigned, almost soft with exhaustion, and they seem to be begging her to do it, please, just do it now.

Slowly, she raises her left hand until the gleaming blade is pressed against his throat. She can see his pulse leap against the metal, seducing its razor thin edge with the promise of soft flesh. His nostrils flare as he takes in a shaky breath, then lets it out through teeth grinding behind wobbling lips. His body is tensed and nervous, but his gaze is steady, locked with hers in a promise of compliance and sacrifice.

Time stands still as she imagines her next move. She thinks of her hands, dripping with crimson, metallic stains, fumbling with the knife as his body drains underneath hers. Would Finn help her escape after she murdered his Commander? Would Maz and Harter still be willing accomplices to a woman who kills a man with his own knife? Would Ofhux’s connections be able to spirit her away before she’s inevitably discovered and captured and killed, or worse?

And then he would be free. He would be free, and she would be trapped in an endless loop of escape, forced to replay this moment over and over again in her head, wondering whether she made the right choice.

His Adam’s apple trembles against the blade when he swallows. “P-please,” he whispers as his eyes mist with tears.

Her vision blurs. “I-I can’t.”

The knife drops to the floor. Her shoulders slump; she’s so, so tired, boneless, exhausted. She can feel his breath against her face, but she can’t muster the effort to haul herself up. The moments tick by again, with puff of air on her forehead and the sluggish retreat of adrenaline from her veins.

“May I touch you?”

She’s too tired to fight, and what for? He’s right, there’s no escape from this hellscape they’re in. There’s no future for her that involves both security, freedom, and control, so she flicks her eyes towards his, and just nods.

And then there’s strong arms around her, hoisting her up around her back and lifting her up from his lap. Once more, she’s surrounded by the scent of war, and of him, and she inhales deep lungfuls of warmth and spice, clinging to his shoulders. It’s not an embrace, not really; she digs her fingers into
the expanse of his back for purchase like an explorer spanning a mountaintop, not a woman melting into a lover’s affection. Still, she can’t help but feel comforted by the restraint evident in his shaking muscles as her lowers her gently back into her chair.

He folds himself down on one knee next to her, his hand resting on the leather armrest. Lip trembling, he asks, “What should I do?”

The temptation to command him is on the tip of her tongue. “What do you mean?” she wonders.

“I mean that I’m ready.” His brow furrows for a second, and she can see the conflict playing out behind his expression. “At least, I think I am. I’m ready to do something, anything.”

“How can I trust you?”

He nods, and leans over to retrieve his knife from where she’s dropped it. Earnestly, he presses it back into her clammy fingers. “You don’t have to trust me. But I trust you.”

Her head is spinning so hard, she can barely get her words out. “I-I don’t know what to say.”

“Anything is fine.”

“Promise me you won’t do it, you won’t rape me again.”

He flinches. “You know I can’t. I already explained, they’ll kill both of us, we’ll both die.”

“Then you’ll die a good man. Isn’t that enough?”

His response is barely a murmur. “It is.”

“And I can trust you with this?”

“I’ve never lied to you, and I’m not about to start now. I promise, next month I won’t touch you, I won’t-” He struggles against the word, his tongue tied up until he spits it out, “r-rape you. Never again, I promise.”

His words thrum with truth. She slumps back into the chair, a lone tear running down her cheek. “Thank you,” she whispers.

He looks at her like she’s hung all the stars in the galaxy. “No,” he rasps. “Thank you, Rey.”

Chapter End Notes

Believe it or not, I actually drafted most of this chapter way back when I started this fic, so the callbacks to TLJ are all coincidental :O
It takes Rey less than a day to rethink everything. The Ceremony, Kylo, their chat the previous morning, it all seems like a byproduct of a bad fever dream that she’s finally broken.

She rubs her face against her pillow, willing the memories from yesterday away, but they remain as fresh and as vibrant as when they were first forged. She sees herself straddling him, his knife against his throat, him cradling her in his arms and kneeling next to her, promising her his life. It’s foolish, ludicrous...and it all actually happened.

There’s a tray of breakfast waiting for her inside her doorway. It’s the same pastries as the day before, plus a bowl of crisp apple slices and a glass of juice. She bites into the pastry and groans at the sensation of buttery, flaky crust giving way to bitter richness. The glittering sugar crystals on the outside give it a satisfying crunch and soon she’s licking the remnants of them off of her fingers, her appetite moving to the remaining fruit.

The slices are crisp and delicious, but she takes her time with them, savouring the way they snap under her teeth and fill her mouth with juice. The fruit has been a mainstay of her morning meal for weeks, but she still hasn’t gotten used to all of the interesting flavours and textures that wake her every day. It’s a luxury she’d never even assumed she’d have, and it’s a luxury she’ll enjoy until her last day-

“I promise, next month I won’t touch you, I won’t-.”

A flush of copper blooms against her tongue. She’s bitten it, not hard, but enough that the apple’s juice seeps into the cut and stings. Annoyed, she swallows her mouthful of tainted fruit then dabs at her tongue with the napkin conveniently provided on the tray.

As she’s stopping the flow of blood in her mouth, she notices a familiar slip of paper sticking out of the remaining apple pieces. Her annoyance multiplies into frustration; frustration at herself for being so weak, and frustration at him for being so persistent. He could have fought her, could have pushed her away or called her crazy for wanting him to stop- to essentially sentence them to death.

She unfurls the paper with one hand and reads:

Good Morning Rey. Meet me tonight at 8?

“Good morning?” she mumbles to herself. “After all of that?”

Once she’s finished her meal, she brings her empty dishes back to the Marthas. Kylo and Phasma have already left for their daily duties, so she feels comfortable enough to loiter in the kitchen, relishing Maz and Harter’s conversation as they wash up.

“The Wife was in an interesting mood today, wouldn’t you say?” Maz responds. “He almost seemed happy. Haven’t seen him like that since-” She purses her lips and very intently avoids Rey’s curious gaze.

“The Commander as well,” Harter muses, her eyes flicking towards her partner.

“The Commander as well,” Maz responds. “He almost seemed happy. Haven’t seen him like that since-” She purses her lips and very intently avoids Rey’s curious gaze.

“Since what?” she probes. The question must be asked.

“Since he was young,” Harter finishes. “We both knew him as a child before .”
“You knew Kylo as a child?” Rey blurts out, then instantly regrets it as Maz and Harter don matching surprised expressions.

“So it’s Kylo now?” Harter nods. “I see.”

Rey shrugs. “I don’t understand why it wouldn’t be. I have been living here for a while.”

“Oh, of course.”

“Hush, Harter, it’s not for us to judge. Don’t be difficult.” Maz smiles. “Yes, we both knew Kylo when he was a young boy, up until—until he was relocated. He requested us as his staff when he was assigned to his own household, and not here we are.”

“I’m fairly certain we have your baking to thank for that,” Harter comments.

“Or your perfect pickles. Either way, watching him over the years has been fascinating.”

“What was he like as a child?” Rey wonders.

“He was quieter then,” Maz laughs. “But still as passionate and impulsive as he is now.”

Harter nods. “He was always a bit of a lonely boy, but not for lack of trying. Same as he is now, he was always a bit too intense for most.”

Rey hops off the counter and grabs the food tokens from their basket next to the door. “Is it strange to you, that you’ll probably watch his children grow up as well?”

Maz gives her a small smile. “Not at all. Kind of poetic, really.”

Ofhux is strangely silent on their way to the market, so much so that Rey wonders whether she’s ill. She chooses the shorter route, bypassing the path and bushes that afforded them so much privacy before, and even fails to comment on the state of the various meats at the butcher.

“Are you feeling alright?” Rey finally asks when they’re in line to pay for produce.

“I’m fine,” Ofhux bites back. “Didn’t sleep well last night. How are you?”

Rey frowns, off-put by the other woman’s overly short answer. “I’m well,” she responds, blandly.

“Good.”

Ofhux’s mood taints the rest of her day as she runs through their previous interactions over and over, combing them for anything that may have offended the other Handmaid in any way. She can’t think of anything, and chalks it up to poor sleep, as suggested, though it doesn’t quite sit right for some reason.

Kylo is surprisingly chipper when they meet that night, humming to himself as he thumbs through a novel. He’s seated in one of the wingback chairs, and the other has been dragged back to its previous position. It’s a cozy setting, a stark contrast to conversations over his heavy walnut desk.

“You don’t look like a man on death’s door.”

He frowns at her. Folding down the corner of his page, he places his book down on the floor and gestures for her to join him. “That’s because I’m not.”

She resists, clinging to the doorframe. “So you’re going back on your word, then? That’s wonderful,
you made it a whole day before backing.”

“That’s not what I meant. I’m keeping my word to you.”

“Then you’re going to die. You said it yourself, they’re going to kill you if you refuse.”

“Rey.” Her name is a sacred vow on his lips. “My entire life, I’ve been living for someone else. The military, the government, my father...You, you’ve given me a chance to live for you, and to live for myself, even if it’s just for a moment.”

She shrugs. “Is it even safe to meet now that your Wife obviously knows about us?”

“What difference does it make?” He shrugs as well in response. “Phasma has her own motivations for things. I’m not going to stop meeting with you just because she knows. It’s not like this is unheard of.”

She finally enters the room and sits down across from him, arms crossed. He doesn’t resume reading, instead he just gazes at her like she’s a precious work of art.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you-” She can’t finish her thought, so she leaves it there, hanging. “I came here tonight to apologize about yesterday. I was just really upset, but looking back on it, I suppose you were right, about the necessity of it, that it.”

She dances around mentioning the act itself. Kylo is not so delicate. “N-no,” he maintains, shaking his head. “I’m not going back on my word, I’m not raping you again. Everything I promised, I meant. I’ll die for you, Rey, and I’ll die for me too. I’d rather be together in death than live separated.”

“It’s not rape, though, you said it yourself.”

“And you said you didn’t enjoy it!” he counters. “What else would it be?”

“Procreation. Assuring the survival of our species.”

He laughs. “It’s so conceited of us to even assume that we deserve to survive. And don’t go back on your words; you know it’s wrong, and I can feel that it’s wrong. It’s not supposed to feel like that.”

“How do you know?” Tears are welling in her eyes, and she can feel her chest starting to stuff up.

“I just do. When I- when we- it doesn’t match how I feel about you.”

“Why-?” Her voice squeaks. “You have everything; why do you care?”

“You make me care. You said it yourself...by choosing to stand by you, I can die a good man.”

“Kylo-”

“I don’t want to die,” he admits. “But I don’t want to hurt you either.”

She gives him a small smile. “There must be another way, some way for us to escape...maybe Mayd-”
“Hush.” He reaches across the gap to rest his finger against her lips. “I’ll see what I can do. But no matter what happens, no matter what opportunities we find, or lack thereof, I promise that I won’t rape you again.”

She’s never been so torn about whether a promise is kept or not.

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The days pass by, and after every one Rey becomes more and more anxious about the outcome of Kylo’s vow, whether he’ll prove himself an honourable fool, or an opportunistic liar.

She never receives her answer. Instead, she finds herself staring at two blue lines on a plastic stick while squatting ungracefully on the toilet.

There’s a soft tap on the bathroom door. “What’s taking so long?” Harter’s voice is sweet but insistent. This monthly ritual is less showy than the others, but in many ways is the most crucial.

“I-” The words catch in Rey’s throat.

Instantly, it’s apparent. “Ofren,” Harter says, firmly. “May I come in?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Okay, I’m coming in now.”

The door creaks open. Harter takes one look at Rey’s slouched form, still slumped over the toilet, and sighs. “Positive, I take it?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Well then.” She walks over and rests her hand on the sink. “What a mixture of emotions you must be feeling now.”

“Y-yeah.” *Mixture* is an understatement; Rey feels as though the entire bulk of the galaxy is contained in her head right now. She gestures with the test. “When I was younger, no matter how bad things got, I never assumed that I would end up like this, that it would happen like this.”

“I can’t imagine you would have. How would you have known?”

“Is it wrong-?” She pauses to collect her thoughts, “-is it wrong that I don’t know what to do? I don’t feel- I don’t know that this is the right thing to do. I feel like bringing a b- *baby* into this world is just wrong.”

Her face burns. What she’s suggesting is treasonous, reason enough for her to be dragged away and beaten by a swirling crowd of scarlet, just like her sister in red mere weeks ago.

The temptation is fleeting, and passes like a breeze. Maybe in another life, another time, she could choose how and when she would become pregnant, but here in Gilead, a baby is nothing but the highest of blessings.

Harter watches the drama unfold on her face. “You can feel whatever you like, but don’t forget that this is a good thing, Ofren, no matter what you’re thinking. This will be your salvation, and the salvation of our people.”

Maybe we don’t deserve to be saved.
She bites her lip. “I just wish- I wish I had a bit more time to myself.”

“Ah. Not ready to be paraded around like Phasma’s prized broodmare?”

A chuckle. “When you put it like that…”

“Well,” Harter announces. “Luckily for you, your first test was faulty.” She plucks the positive test from Rey’s fingers and twists it like she’s strangling a chicken. The plastic pops and the blue lines dissolve in a blur of debris. “And your second test was resoundingly negative.”

Rey’s eyes go wide. “How-?”

“Now, if you’ll just give me a bit of privacy-” Harter gestures to the bathroom door. “There’s no risk of a positive test here.”

“But, if she finds out-”

“She won’t find out. These tests aren’t foolproof...it’s well within reason to take another if your bleeding doesn’t start in the next two weeks.”

Trembling, Rey stands up from the toilet and washes her hands, then ducks out of the tiny washroom. “Thank you,” she breathes, before shutting the door behind her.

She sits on her bed, reeling, until Harter emerges with the negative test in tow. “That was a lot more awkward than I expected,” the older woman says, grimacing. “I had a hard time not pissing on my own hand.”

“Yeah.”

She gives Rey a small smile then disappears down the staircase. Rey places a hand on her still flat abdomen, thankful for the time to collect her thoughts, but still terrified at what the near future held in store for her, and now her child.

Their child.

“ What am I going to tell him?” she murmurs to herself, backing up against the wooden headboard for support. He’ll be happy, of course, but there’s so many other reactions he may have, situations he may come up with, that her stomach lurches with anxiety.

She’s still in a daze when she meets with Ofhux moments later, though not so distracted as to miss the other woman’s deteriorated state. Her face is gaunt, her normally round cheeks hollowed and thin, and there’s dark bags under her eyes. Unlike most recent excursions, she chooses the long way to the market, and pauses only a couple minutes into the path.

Dark eyes meet Rey’s hazel. “Are you still meeting with him?”

Rey’s mouth drops slightly open. “Yes.”

“And what have you learned?”

“Learned?”

Ofhux’s face twists in a mixture of disgust and disappointment. “I’m sorry, I just assumed that there was a purpose to your covert liaisons. A practical purpose, that is.”

Rey’s face flames. “So staying alive isn’t practical enough for you?”
Ofhux’s mouth twists with a biting retort, but she pauses, rethinking it, and swallows. “I’m sorry, Ofren. I haven’t heard from my sister in over two weeks, and I’m a bit on edge.”

Rey’s anger melts. “Ofhux, I’m so sorry.”

“I don’t know what’s happened to her.” Ofhux faces forward, her face going impassive as her voice trembles. “Normally she contacts me, lets me know she’s okay, but Poe said-”

“Poe?” Rey interjects. “You mean Poe who used to work in my household? That Poe?”

It’s a testament to Ofhux’s state of mind that she doesn’t flinch at the slip up. “Yeah, that Poe. He’s been visiting her for the past few months and feeding me information, but he said that she’s been gone for the past week. I don’t know what to do.” Her gloved hands start shaking. “I’ve tried everything. I’ve asked my sources, I’ve looked around the house, but the Commander has never let me go near his office, and I don’t think he brings any work home anyway. He doesn’t trust anyone, least of all me.”

Rey’s head is still reeling at the irrefutable confirmation that at least one former member of her household was spying for Mayday that she doesn’t catch on to Ofhux’s insinuations. Fortunately, the other woman is too impatient to rely on subtlety. “Ofren,” she pleads. “I need your help. You said your Commander trusts you, and you’ve been in his office enough times to know where he keeps anything important. Please, please check and see if you can find anything about Paige. Please.” Her voice cracks. “You’re my only hope.”

“I-” Rey takes in her face, takes in the anguish and the barely suppressed tears. “Of course, I’ll look for you.”

“Thank you!” Ofhux reaches out and clutches her hand. “Bless you, Ofren.”

That night, Rey lies back in her bed, staring out her window at the starry night sky. The day’s events flash through her head, her discovery this morning, tempered by Ofhux’s plea, culminating in Kylo’s unexplained absence that night due to “paperwork.” She tries to quell her rising stress by taking deep breaths, remembering from the Centre that stress is quite possibly the worst thing for a developing baby.

She focuses on the brightest light in the night sky, and smiles. “One day you’ll see the stars,” she whispers to the darkness. “And when you do, I hope you remember me.”

*  

There’s a Birth happening in the community, heralded by the twin vehicles that arrive at the house minutes after sunrise, ready to usher Rey and Phasma to the blessed event. Rey squashes herself into the Birthmobile with all of the other Handmaids in the neighbourhood, her skirts joining the overstuffed mass of scarlet crammed into the back of the van.

Ofhux is there as well, one seat over. Rey makes eye contact with her and nods, which the other woman returns, grim determination set in her eyes. A Birth is the one occasion where the women, both Wives and Handmaids, are offered a moment of celebration, at least after the biological event itself is finished. Once the beverages are flowing, Rey should be able to spirit back down the street to her house and rifle through Kylo’s office, without Phasma noticing.

The birthing Handmaid’s name is Ofmitaka. She’s a short, portly woman who’s a veteran at birthing, having been through two previously. Her Commander, a nervous looking dark haired man, is just on his way out when the women arrive, and stammers nervously at the approaching crowd of blue and
red.

“J-just upstairs!” He gestures wildly, then darts outside to the safety of his black vehicle and driver.

“Not staying around for the fun, Dopheld?” Phasma crows. The man just shakes his head and turns a light shade of pink.

The master bedroom is smaller than the one Rey’s used to, but is still big enough to house a large bed along with a luxurious looking cot, on which the Wife is currently writhing in mock-birth pains. Phasma crouches next to the cot, her tall frame dwarfing the other Wives, and urges, “Bazine, you’re doing so well. Keep breathing, in and out, in and out.”

Rey frowns at the bizarre scene of all of the blue gowned Wives dabbing Bazine’s head and cooing, while Ofmitaka groans and strains with very real birth pains only a couple of steps away. It’s perverse, and cruel, and yet strangely unifying, the way each class of woman dotes on their fertile mother with equal affection.

Ushered over by Ofhux, she kneels down beside the bed and clutches the labouring woman’s hand in hers, gritting her teeth as the other woman squeezes. “We’re all here for you,” she murmurs. Her own womb feels tense, her breasts heavy in sympathy, and she watches the Birth not only with rapture at the miracle, but anticipation of her own future near enough to taste.

It’s not a long labour, at least according to the Aunts, but it’s long enough that the sun has almost set by the time the baby’s crown is visible. The Wives usher the Wife of Mitaka up onto the birthing stool behind Ofmitaka, then both women groan in unison as an Aunt guides the baby out of the body and into the world.

Scarlet gowned arms catch the Handmaid as she nearly faints with exertion. Rey holds the woman’s shoulder and, together with the other women, guides her back to the bed where she can rest in a mound of already soiled sheets and towels.

Rey glances back at the Wives, who are fussing around the freshly birthed child. He’s beautiful, not a blemish in sight, with a full head of sandy brown curls like his birth mother. The name ‘Christopher’ is breathed like a prayer, the promise of better things to come. The tingle of forbidden alcohol is in the air, cloying and sweet, as the Wives begin to celebrate in their own special way. Away from the gaze of men, even the most demure Wife lets her hair down amongst her comrades, and Phasma is far from demure, cradling a glass of beverage in her hand, and laughing.

The atmosphere is heady with the scent of birth and bodies and celebration, so it’s not suspicious for Rey to duck out for a breath of fresh air. Once she’s free, she takes a couple of gulps of crisp night then heads down the sidewalk to her household.

It’s a short walk, a fragment of her daily trek with Ofhux, barely enough time to air the smell of blood and fluid out of her clothes before she slips into the dark house through the side door. Only the regular squeaks and creaks of the building greet her. She slips off her shoes and tiptoes through the kitchen, the dining room, and into the entrance hall. Schooling her expression into something pleasantly neutral, she climbs the stairs, trying to be silent enough to not disturb while also seeming relaxed enough to not raise suspicion.

She opens the door to the master suite to find that Kylo is already asleep in the bedroom. The door is cracked open enough that she can hear the steady thrum of his breathing, soft and even in sleep. It contrasts with her own anxiety ridden gulps, which she attempts to still by chewing on her cheek. Tempted, she prods the bedroom door open a bit wider, and is rewarded by a glimpse of his face. It’s soft and pale, lips plush and relaxed, without a hint of the worry and lines that normally mar his face.
He looks young, and at peace.

*Is it a betrayal for her to be here?* She shakes her head, trying to dismiss the nagging deep in her belly. Knowing him, he would probably volunteer any information freely, as long as it made her happy. At least that’s what she tells herself as she soundlessly closes the door and tiptoes into his office.

His desk is a mess of paperwork. There’s been an attempt to file every document in dated paper folders, however it’s clear that some of them have beared the brunt of his frustration, judging by their crumpled corners and bent contents. Gingerly, she counts back three weeks, taking her to the bottom of the stack. She pries the folder out, careful to not disturb the others, and cracks it open.

There’s several performance reviews, still unsigned, followed by a couple of maps and lists of coordinates. She’s so tempted to linger, but it’s not her current mission, so she flips past. The papers get progressively unmarred, untouched towards the bottom of the pile, indicating that Kylo has most likely not even seen their contents, and she’s about to switch folders when she sees the list.

“*STATE EXECUTIONS*” it reads in bold, blocky letters, followed by a list of names.

*Temmin “Snap” Wexley*

*U.O. Statura*

*Paige Tico*

Her heart shudders.

*Paige Tico, 28, female. Private execution by gunpoint.*

*Charges: prostitution, lewdness, heresy, treason.*

*Treatment: De-sex body and display for two weeks on the Wall.*

Snapshots of the bagged, faceless bodies hanging from the Wall dance in front of Rey’s eyes like flashing lights. One of those nameless bodies was Ofhux’s sister, and she never would have known.

“De-sex,” she whispers, horrified. Of course, the publicly displayed executions at the Wall are all assumed to be male, but if the military is going through the effort of hiding women they’ve killed...

Rey skims the rest of the page. “How many?” she mutters. How many potential mothers have they murdered? How many secrets?

She sees the signature at the bottom of the order, and her stomach clenches.

*CPT. Phasma REN*

“What?” she breathes.

It doesn’t make any sense. Woman can’t hold rank in the military, just like they can’t hold positions in government. Woman aren’t *made* for such things, yet when she thinks of Phasma’s astonishing height and her cool, commanding voice, it *does* make sense, and yet-

“Hello?”

Kylo’s voice, groggy with sleep, echoes from the next room. Panicked, Rey shoves the folder back in the pile, grabs a random book, and jumps into one of the wingback chairs just as he blearily enters the office.
“Rey, what are you doing?”

Too late, she realizes the title of the book she’s grabbed, *Human Anatomy*, as well as the page she’s opened it to, which happens to be a macabre cross section of a real human penis. She squeaks and slams the book shut, but not before he’s caught the image and the flush on her cheeks.

“Curious?” he asks, then immediately regrets. “I mean, there’s nothing wrong with looking, if you want to know about those things. Knowledge is good,” he finishes, lamely.

“Knowledge is good,” she parrots back to him. “I see. I was just at the Birth, and I supposed I wanted to know more.”

“Oh, yeah?” He slumps down in the chair across from her. “How did it go? Was the baby-?”

“He’s perfect.” She smiles.

He lets out a sigh of relief. “Oh good. Mitaka’s been so nervous for months now that it would be a Shredder.”

Wincing, she digs her fingers into the book’s cover. “No, he’s a wonderful baby boy. The Wife named him Christopher.”

“A strong name.”

“Yes.”

He’s so wistful, still clad in his black sleeping clothes with a small smile plastered on his face. Her heart tugs in her chest; *now is the time* it beckons, even though her head is screaming no.

“I-” For some reason, it’s stuck in her throat, her brain’s last ditch effort at keeping the news concealed.

Kylo tilts his head to the side. “-yes?”

“...I’m pregnant.”

She blurts it out so quickly, she’s scared that he didn’t quite catch it. His face remains normal, impassive, for a couple of heart-pounding seconds, and then his forehead creases and eyes crinkle, and he’s *grinning*, genuinely, and it’s so beautiful she feels like crying.

“Really?” he breathes, as if he’s scared his voice will somehow chase away the pregnancy.

“Really,” she affirms. “I’ve been feeling a bit unwell and m-my breasts are really sore and tender.”

He blushes, and she’s suddenly struck by the perverse strangeness of this entire situation. This man has been inside of her in the most intimate way possible, the child growing inside her is his, and yet she still feels oddly forward mentioning her symptoms to him. After all, he’s never actually seen or felt her breasts or almost any other part of her body, and they’ve never spoken of the explicit details of their physical congress, only the concept.

For a second, she imagines a different life, what she imagines life was like *before*. Kylo is still standing in front of her, but instead of a harsh black uniform or sterile pyjamas he’s wearing a soft grey sweater. His face is more relaxed, full and healthy and free of the stresses currently etched in the corners of his eyes. She pictures herself in a blue dress, knee length, with her hair loose and flowing over her shoulders instead of being tucked under a starched white bonnet. Her skin is tanned and
freckled and they’re sitting together somewhere, like a park or a nice restaurant, not squirreled away in a dusty corner of a drafty old house.

But that’s neither here nor there. The only similarity between the two scenarios resides with the tiny, unborn baby inside of her. Regardless of how he or she was conceived, her heart still swells for the little soul she’s been blessed with the privilege to carry. That’s her mission, after all, that’s her entire purpose for being placed in this household, and that’s the greatest blessing any Handmaid could ever hope to experience. At least for nine whole months she’s allowed to feel loved and relied upon by someone. What else could she ever hope to ask for?

And then Kylo reaches over to cup her cheek, and her entire world turns upside down.

She shudders at his gentle touch, at the way his thumb rubs against the ridge of her upper lip. His skin is rough, but the motion is soft and her skin tingles with joy.

His hand stills. “I’m sorry, may I touch you?” tumbles out of his mouth.

Rey stares at his dark eyes and sees the same man who has showed her both unimaginable pain and stirring kindness. Those eyes have loomed over top of her, and gazed at her tenderly, have inspired terror and heartbreak. She sees the eyes that their child will no doubt have, a child that he will hopefully raise to be a kind, compassionate person with a sense of right. She sees that future for him, as a father, and her heart breaks.

Then she closes her own eyes, and brings her lips to his in a tender kiss.

It’s too much and not enough at the same time, the way she’s pressed up against him, digging her hands into his shirt as his fingers pry into her hair under her bonnet. He groans, half aroused, half frustrated, so she laughs against his mouth and frees her hair with a tug of the string at her neck. His rumble of satisfaction vibrates in his chest.

With his arms at her waist, he pulls her over from her chair to his, until she’s splayed up against him on his lap. Her wandering hands have found his hair now, and she marvels at the silkiness of his dark waves as she cards them through her fingers.

He’s pleasure drunk when she pulls away, his cheeks bright pink and his lips swollen and plush. She’s sure she looks equally debauched from his perspective, which no doubt titillates him even more, but she feels...confused? Maybe happy? There’s a measure of satisfaction she gets seeing him so defenseless beneath her, but she’d be foolish to claim that it’s all that sterile. It’s not love, but there is something else, something she’s never quite felt with another person before.

“Thank you,” he breathes, his breath whispering over her lips.

She responds with the opposite. “How many people have you killed?”

His entire body stiffens beneath her. “Why does it matter?” The ‘now’ at the end of his statement is left unsaid, but is still implicitly included.

“Because it does.” She strokes his cheek with her fingertip, and his lip trembles. “How many people have you killed?”

“I don’t know.” He’s wiggling nervously beneath her, but still too entranced to simply dump her off of his lap.

“You don’t know because you’ve never kept track, or you don’t know because there’s too many to count.” She’s racing down the rabbit hole her traitorous mind has apparently threw her. “Tell me!”
“Neither! Both! I don’t know.” His forehead wrinkles. “Why does this matter, after we ki-?”

“I just, just need to know-” A sob is building in her throat. She can’t finish her thought.

Luckily, he senses where she’s going. “You need to know what kind of monster your baby will have as a father.”

She drops her head, her forehead pressed up against his. There’s no words for what she’s feeling, only images of a tiny, perfect infant cradled in bloodstained hands.

“I’ll do my best, Rey, I promise,” he whispers against her lips. “You’ll be there too.”

“Kylo.” Her voice breaks. “You know that’s not how this works.”

“It doesn’t matter, I’ll make it work. My father is an important man in the government. He’ll make an exception-”

“An exception for what? He’ll make me your permanent Handmaid? You know there’s a shortage, right? There’s no way they’ll let you keep me forever.”

He blushes, embarrassed that he’s been caught in his fantasy. “Well, I was hoping that maybe they wouldn’t have you as my permanent Handmaid, that maybe-”

“You didn’t honestly think that-?” She looks up into his glassy eyes and tear stained cheeks. “Kylo, no.”

She thinks back to the documents she saw, with his Wife’s scrawling signature signed on execution orders, and her stomach sinks even more. He must think that, since his own marriage is unconventional, it could be easily reversed. She sighs. “It doesn’t work that way. Phasma’s not going to just stand aside and let me take her place. That’s insane.”

She remembers something else though, something the Marthas mentioned months ago when she first arrived at the house. Something about Kylo's true parents, their background, Anakin Skywalker...Mayday.

"Is there no one else?" she asks. "Any other connections, anyone from your past that could help?"

His right eye twitches. “Well, I’ve got to try something, I can’t- I can’t lose you Rey. I lo-”

She presses her mouth to his in another kiss.
Kylo starts his day like any other, his head foggy and his heart full of disappointment.

Phasma’s taken to sleeping in the bed with him, no doubt because it makes it easier for her to monitor his comings and goings throughout the night. He stares, bleary eyed, at her slick blonde hair, pristine even in her sleep, and her expansive back clothed in a conservative nightgown the colour of toothpaste. It’s hard to not resent this jailer masquerading as a Wife, even more so when his dreams are preoccupied with another.

As well, she’s been away less and less, citing that she needs to be at the house “for the baby”, whatever that means. In the ten years he’s known Phasma, she’s never shown a hint of maternal instincts, but now that Rey’s pregnant it seems like she’s constantly hovering around the other woman, monitoring her weight gain and her meals.

It was sickening, watching Rey hand the positive pregnancy test to his Wife, knowing everything that would come next. Now the house, normally empty and desolate, is positively crawling with Wives from all over the neighbourhood, beckoned to come and drool over his Handmaid’s progressively rounding belly. Phasma is in her element, luxuriating as the women fawn over this girl turned incubator.

But then again, Phasma always loved watching defilement, loved watching the smear of sin and depravity over what was once pure. He pushes his face into his pillow, trying to block out the memories of her grinding atop him as he moaned, embarrassed and ashamed, a mere 22 year old virgin only ankle deep into manhood. He had cried after, deep heaving sobs that he had tried to muffle into the blankets of this very bed, only to have her throw his shame back into his face.

“What kind of man are you?” she had spat. “What will you father say when I tell him you bawled like a baby on our wedding night?”

She mocked him every time after, so much so that he sometimes had a hard time performing despite her pretty face and voluptuous body. When she brought up the idea of a Handmaid, he had been simultaneously relieved and repulsed; he craved a modicum of control in the bedroom, but for some reason the idea of some faceless, pliant body under him made him sick.

And now Rey is pregnant with his child, and he feels helpless once more. Not just with seeing Phasma parade her like a broodmare, but also with the fact that he’ll be alone again in less than a year. He can’t go back to the way things were before, to his loveless, shapeless mess of a marriage and his mind numbing occupation. He loves the way Rey challenges him, loves the way she finds pleasure in the tiny things, he loves, he loves -

“Can you possibly try and think a bit quieter? Some of us are trying to sleep.”

Sighing, he pushes his aching body out of bed and walks over to his closet, trying to ignore the way Phasma’s icy blue eyes follow him around the room. He flicks through hangers until he lands on one of his freshly pressed black uniforms. Pulling open a creaky drawer, he retrieves clean socks and underwear, then plods out the door to change in his office.

Once he’s freshly dressed, hepeekshis head out the door and glances at the bedroom. The Phasma-
A shaped lump is still in the bed, so he feels safe enough to afford himself a moment of sentimentality to start his day. As quietly as he can manage, he sneaks across the hall and ducks his head into the nursery. It’s been freshly painted in a neutral grey that highlights the soft rug on the floor and the crisp bedding in the carved walnut crib.

He runs his fingers over tiny leather booties resting on the change table. “Praise be,” he whispers.

As usual, the Marthas are already up, dutifully preparing the day’s meals. Maz is mixing batter for apple muffins, while Harter is slicing the apples themselves. He watches her knife slide through the juicy flesh, paring the ruby red skin away in a long, continuous strip that falls in a pile on the countertop.

“Need anything before you go?”

Kylo shakes his head at Maz. “No, I think I’ll wait for breakfast this morning.”

“Suit yourself. What’s on the menu for Rey?”

“I’ll have to see what he has.” He wrings his hands together self-consciously. “Lately there hasn’t been much variety due to conflict in the southern states, New Canaan specifically.”

“Back in my day, we called it Florida.” Harter cocks an eyebrow. “But I suppose now you’ll have my head for speaking that.”

“Not today. But you’re cutting it close.” He wags his finger in her direction, then almost immediately pulls it back, awkward. He’s been too close with the household staff, especially since the news of Rey’s pregnancy got out. He’s getting too attached; too attached to the Marthas, to Finn, and to this rag tag family unit that seems to have sprung up over the last few months.

Maz was the first to contribute, by sewing a small onesie from fabric scraps in her spare time. Next Finn painted a wooden car to look like the real one he drove every day, then Harter produced a painting of the night sky. Phasma had scoffed at the gifts, but Kylo treasured them, evidence of the future joy he anticipates sharing with his and Rey’s child.

His child.

No. Today is the day. He’s thought about it for quite some time, and determined that now would be the right time to talk with his father about Rey. Enough time has passed that she’s proven her fertility, and he’s talked up her beauty and sweet disposition enough that his idea shouldn’t seem to ludicrous.

The cool morning air bites at his skin as he steps outside. He walks down the path to the gate and turns left, retracing the well worn steps to his childhood home only a couple of blocks away. Once he arrives, he knocks twice, sharp and hard, against the door, which is pulled open a moment later by an Angel dressed in black.

“Commander Ren.” The Angel steps back and salutes.

“At ease,” Kylo mutters, already halfway across the entryway. “Is my father in his study?”

“Yes, but...”

“Thank you.”

Snoke’s study is less of an office and more like a grand throne room. Lush rugs are piled atop glossy ebony floors, red velvet curtains hang from the walls, and an ornately carved desk is featured
prominently in the centre. He lounges behind the desk, casually, still in his gold housecoat and sleepwear.

One of his glassy blue eyes flicks up. “Kylo. Here to raid my pantry, as usual.”

“N-not just that,” Kylo stutters, suddenly nervous. “I was hoping we could talk.”

“Talk?” Snoke’s sagging, leathery skin creaks upward into the facsimile of a smile that doesn’t meet his eyes. “I thought you didn’t have much time to talk these days, what with your new busy lifestyle. What is it that you need, my son?”

Kylo steps forward, hands clasped tightly behind his back. It’s now or never, and he can feel his heart thumping painfully in his chest. It’s worth it, she’s worth it. “It’s not that I need anything, not really. I was just thinking- you know R-Ofren, my handmaid?”

“Of course.” Snoke flicks a finger dismissively. “My apologies for not visiting yet. I’m sure Phasma is devastated.”

It’s an empty gesture. “Yes, she’s wondered why, but naturally assumes that you are quite busy.”

“-which I am.” Snoke’s face cracks into a wicked grin. “However this Ofren creature is... intriguing to me. The way you have described her, with her wit and beauty despite her flawed moral character. She sounds like a minx, a Lilith for the modern age. Has she bewitched you, my boy?”

“No, it’s not like that at all!” Images of Rey, stoned to death for entrapping her Commander spring forth. “She’s pu- been purified, by her compliance. She is kind, pliant, soft-spoken...if not for her unfortunate upbringing, she would have made an exemplary wife.”

“Ah yes, her upbringing. What do you know of that?”

Kylo can almost feel Snoke’s fingers prying into his mind. “Just a small bit. I know she was abandoned as a child. Had to fend for herself on the streets.”

“Ah, is that what she told you?” Snoke strokes his chin. “Well, it’s not a lie, but it’s not quite the full truth either. It seems that your Handmaid has always had a bit of an enchanting personality, so much so that she enchanted her own parents to sin.”

Kylo frowns. “How?”

“Has she told you who her parents were?”

“No sir. I don’t even think she knows.”

“I see.” Snoke takes his time, relishing each word as if it were a bite of delicious dessert. “Her father was a lower level Commander. Her mother was his Handmaid, who chose to rebel and attempted to return to the home and steal the child from her rightful parents. The father, deluded with his own sense of self-righteousness, attempted to assist. Luckily, the Wife was a pious woman who reported them both immediately, but not before the Handmaid kidnapped the child and left her out on the street.”

Kylo’s head swims with this information. “Y-you’ve known all of this? For how long?”

“I have always known.”

“Of course.” Rey would likely be delighted to hear that she inherited her fiery nature from a set of
rebellious parents, but there’s something about Snoke’s easy disclosure of the story that gives him pause. “Thank you for sharing this information,” he says, cautiously. “I appreciate the insight.”

“It’s not for your benefit, per say. It’s more of an object lesson on the importance of bending to the Lord’s will. Your Handmaid’s biological donors attempted to disobey the Lord’s will, attempted to steal away one of His precious gifts and subvert His divine plan. And now you, my son, stand before me, informing me that this product of subversion has become a most pliant, devout Handmaid. Praise be.”

“Praise be.” Kylo clenches his sweating hands behind his back. “She really is the most-”

“Yes, yes.” Snoke waves his hand. “You’ve said as such. In a couple of months, bring her to me, and I will determine for myself how dutiful and pious she truly is.”

Kylo’s brain stutters as he struggles to process what he just heard. “E-excuse me?”

“You heard me.” Snoke’s craggy mouth cracks into a grin. “She’s proven her worth just as you have proven yours. Bring her to me when she’s in her ninth month, and I will determine her worthiness.”

“Her worthiness?”

“Don’t act so surprised. I though I have thought it time that I give you another brother or sister. Wouldn’t that be a delight?”

Kylo’s vision goes red. Images of Rey, strong, intelligent, beautiful Rey, bent under his father’s wrinkled body flash through his mind. Shaking, he clasps his hands behind his back and nods. “Of course. It would be such a blessing.”

But it wouldn’t be a blessing, it would be an abomination, no matter how fruitful Rey could be or how many round faced, hazel eyed babies she may be able to produce. She doesn’t belong to his father, or Gilead, she belongs to- no. She isn’t yours. She doesn’t belong to anyone, no matter the colour of her gown or the circumstances of her upbringing.

Unsurprisingly, the voice in his head belongs to Rey, and his mind drifts back to her, looming above him, his own knife gripped in her hand. It’s such a striking image that the next question tumbles out of his mouth, unbeckoned.

“Would it not be plausible for her to, perhaps, remain assigned to my household? If the offspring is viable?”

Snoke raises a nearly non-existent eyebrow. “Why are you suggesting this?”

Kylo wracks his brain for some sort of logical conclusion, something to blanket what could easily, and accurately, be interpreted as love sick delusion. “Well, I know that some doctors have been suggesting the idea that some people are more compatible than others, produce healthier offspring than others-”

“Heresy,” his father spits. “So called scientific nonsense that led to the fall of our old government. God’s will dictates the health of our children, not any sort of so-called compatibility. If your Handmaid produces a healthy heir, it will be a testament to the sanctification of her spirit and the generosity of our Lord, nothing more and nothing less.” His long, brittle fingers clench into the buttery leather of his armchair. “You know this. What’s gotten into you?”

Kylo’s tongue is a dead weight in his mouth. Nervously, he chews on his cheek to keep his mouth from flapping open and ruining any opportunity he has to save what’s left of his life, his dignity. As
usual, his father is expertly chipping away the walls he’s built around his heart, exposing the soft, unfocused desires that truly motivate him.

“I just-” He hates how small his voice sounds in that moment, so young and afraid.

“Oh Kylo.” There’s a rustle of fibres rubbing against each other as Snoke rises, his housecoat pooling luxuriously around his feet. He stalks around the desk, each step slow and intentional. Pausing before Kylo, he extends a single finger and drags it down the younger man’s cheek. “My boy. Too long you’ve been fighting on the front, far away from a more civilized life.”

“F-forgive me. I have forgotten my place.”

“Of course.” Again Snoke brushes the side of his face, his dry, wrinkled skin catching on Kylo’s stubble. “But remember that I know you. I know your motivations, and the heart beneath them. Don’t think you can spout the same nonsense outside of these walls.” He clucks his tongue. “Careful, my son. One could almost think that you have compassion for your pretty little Handmaid.”

My son.

A flash of blue eyes and a roguish grin. Braided nut brown hair and a coy smile. A disembodied voice, jumbled by age and a fading memory that warbles out, “Oh, and this is my son, Ben.”

Kylo winces, but luckily Snoke has already turned away, stalking back to his desk.

“Bring the Handmaid to me once she’s in her ninth month. I wish to see this remarkable spirit of hers in person.”

Mitaka could not be more incompetent if he tried. For the third time in as many minutes, Kylo crosses out another misspelled word on the Commander’s report, and glances over the document at the other two men in his office.

“Mitaka. This is-” He presses his lips together and shakes his head. “- truly abysmal.”

Commander Hux sneers at his dark haired comrade, who is trembling and sweating next to him. “I’ve told him the same. Mitaka, did you even go to school?” He laughs cruelly at his own joke.

Kylo refuses to acknowledge Hux’s posturing and flicks his eyes back to the report. “I don’t understand what you’re trying to report here. Are you saying that corn production was both halted by rebel activity, yet is also increasing?”

“Well actually sir, I-” Mitaka chokes on his spit, causing a tiny spray of it to fly across the air and into Hux’s face. The redhead’s cheeks go purple, his pale eyes bulging dangerously.

“You disgusting -”

“Dopheld, you’re dismissed.” Kylo tosses the document onto his desk. “Rewrite this and submit it back to me by 0800 tomorrow.”

“Yes s-sir.” Mitaka grabs the report with a visibly sweaty hand and backs out of the room, his eyes not leaving Hux’s. Once he’s gone, Hux darts over to the chair across from Kylo’s desk and sling himself into it like he owns it.

“Honestly, I have no idea why Snoke keeps him around. If I were in charge, he would be the first to
Kylo resists a shudder at the idea. “We can only trust that all of us are in our positions due to Providence. Now, do you have those reports I requested?”

“On you-know-who?” Hux’s eyes glitter dangerously, and he smirks. He pulls a battered folder from his uniform’s breast pocket and lays it on the desk with a flourish. “I think you’ll like what you find. There’s been an increase in unmarked vans travelling north through the mountains over the past six months. Previously we have been unable to track them through the Lord’s Passageway, but a few weeks ago we managed to get two Angel scouts back with some news. Apparently, the Canadian government has taken it upon themselves to accompany the vans through the northernmost part of the pass with an armed guard!”

“And you’re sure this is the government? Not another guerilla organization, or—”

“We’re not sure, no, but I can’t imagine any rebel group could be as well equipped as these troops seem.” Hux waves his hand. “It’s all in the folder. I think we’ve finally established enough of a pattern to begin cracking down on these traitors.”

“Are you sure? I’d hate to amass time and resources only to ambush a convoy of vegetable delivery men, again.”

“That was one time!” Hux splutters.

“Right.” Kylo runs his finger down a chart tracking the goings on of windowless transport vehicles travelling northbound. There’s a lot, for sure; the northern provinces of Gilead need supplies just as much as the southernmost parts, but they can’t all be produce deliveries.

“Would you like one of my men to analyze the—?”

“No.” His voice is sharper than necessary, and Hux recoils. “I’ll study it on my own.”

“Of course.”

There must be a pattern. Even as Hux tries to get his attention for additional matters, he’s already skimming the numbers and looking over surveillance footage for something, any sort of pattern that may help him identify which vans are the outliers. His mind starts racing again, desperate to identify the leak in the system, the origin point for these special deliveries.

And for what? That, he can’t quite admit, not even to himself.

* 

*There’s a baby with his mother’s eyes and his father’s tousled waves, playing on a rug with some simple wooden blocks not ten feet in front of him. Kylo groans and his hands claw against the floor, his legs useless for some unknown reason, but no matter how fast he pulls himself, the baby remains outside of his reach.*

Then the scene changes, and he’s in in his bedroom. The curtains are drawn, with only a small sliver of sunlight streaming out from the bottom of the window to illuminate the scene. It’s gut achingly familiar; Rey, in her hood and scarlet gown, on her back while he thrusts into her. Phasma is curiously absent, however the coupling is still devoid of any passion whatsoever.

Then the thrusts speed up, and Rey starts crying out in ecstasy. Her mouth drops open and her hair tumbles free from its confines to flood the bedspread. Fingers curling, she raises her shaking hand
up to stroke his cheek, then stutters out, “I love you, Ben.”

He looks up at his own face, and recoils as his black Commander’s uniform bursts into ashes, melting into a garish golden bathrobe and linen pyjamas, his face contorting into Snoke’s wrinkled maw. Thrusting even more violently, his father pounds Rey into the bed, hunching over her until his weathered lips can lick the sweat beading on her forehead, which only incites another guttural moan from her throat.

He wants to run over and tear his body from her, but his legs won’t move, he wants to yell but his throat is closed. Channeling the anger bubbling up from his chest, he thrashes his arms about wildly, hitting the walls, the bedposts, himself, every cell in his body screaming why why why why -

“KYLO!”

His face stings. Wincing, he pries open his crusty eyelids and sees Phasma looming over him, one tense hand hovering over her chest.

“Did you just...slap me?”

Her mouth forms a thin line across her face. “It was either that or let you murder both of us in your sleep,” she responds, teeth clenched. “What’s gotten into you?”

“Stress.” He tries to sit up, but she’s pinning him down on the bed with her legs straddling his hips. He wiggles, frustrated, but she doesn’t budge.

“That’s not an answer. You’ve always been stressed. Nothing has changed.” Her brow furrows. “Is this because of the baby?”

It’s a loaded question. It always is with her. “I-I suppose so. Must be.” He lets himself relax against the bed. “It’s such a big change, and it’s happening so quickly.”

She snorts, sliding off of him to sag back into the mattress. “Because so much is going to change for you,” she mocks. “You’re not the one who is going to be stuck at home all day.”

“Like you’re going to let something as trivial as have a child keep you out of things. Isn’t that what the Marthas are for?”

Phasma laughs. Like everything else she does, it seems calculated and mechanical. “I’m sure your father would have a field day with that request. If I wasn’t already a thorn in his side-”

“Why don’t you just get on your knees for him? Seemed to work for you before.”

There’s a moment of tense silence, then she lets out another bone chilling laugh. “I love how you consider being assigned the wife of a petulant man-child some kind of reward. Though I suppose it only makes sense, considering the petulant man-child is you.”

Kylo chews on his lip, then grunts with frustration and heaves himself out of bed. “I’ll sleep in my office.”

“Suit yourself.” She makes a show of arching her back and spreading her generous limbs over his side of the bed. “You’re just taking up space anyways.”

He tries not to feel completely emasculated as he slumps out of his bedroom, pillow under his arm, but it’s no use. To her, he’s always been a sniveling, weak willed little boy, enhanced no doubt by
her presence in his father’s house during his formative years. He remembers her, clad in a khaki gown that clashed with her light hair and porcelain skin, parading a selection of Handmaids into his father’s office as he sat outside and watched. He was never allowed in during the process.

Once he came of age, his father told him Aunt Phasma was assigned to be his wife. Naturally he was confused, for she was older than him and an Aunt, but duty reigned over any inquisition. She looked completely different dressed in white on their wedding day, her normally severe hair curled around her shoulders and crowned by a lace veil. Still, there was nothing demure or virginal about the way she took him that night, or every other night after, until he felt like a shell of himself, too empty to truly care.

Groaning, he slumps into his office chair and attempts to stuff the pillow under his neck. A couple of minutes dedicated to twitching and rearranging his bulky frame results in a position that is neither comfortable nor conducive to getting a decent night’s sleep, so he grabs his pillow and stomps out into the hall, down the staircase, and through the dining room. A servant’s room isn’t the most dignified place to spend the night, but he’ll be damned if he has to spend another second clashing with her.

He pauses at the entryway to the kitchen, and cocks his head to the side at the sound of crunching coming from the far corner. “H-hello?”

It’s Rey. Of course it’s Rey. She’s bathed in moonlight, clad in only a simple white nightdress, her feet bare against the polished wood floor. There’s a gnawed apple core in her hand, and her cheeks look full of fruit as she looks up at him with wide eyes.

It’s the most adorable thing he’s ever seen.

“Can’t sleep?” he wonders, his voice gravelly.

She shakes her head and swallows her last bite. “I keep on having these crazy dreams,” she whispers, her free hand reaching up to rub her belly. “Last night I dreamt I was a chicken farmer whose flock kept on escaping. It didn’t matter what I did, these chickens kept on breaking through the gate or burrowing under the fence, and I was so stressed because the inspector was coming any day to inventory the supply, and it was just—” Her voice trails off into a sigh. “It was really strange. Especially because I’ve never even seen a chicken, not in real life.”

She looks up at him through a wisp of brown hair, and his breath catches in his throat.

“I’ve missed you,” he mumbles.

Her eyes don’t quite mirror the smile that crinkles the corners of her lips. “I haven’t gone anywhere.”

“You know what I mean though.”

“Do it?” Now her eyes sparkle, albeit still with a touch of weariness. “Don’t assume, Commander.”

“Assume that you appreciated our late night chats just as much as I did?” His voice drops to a whisper. “Rey, I’ve m-missed you so much.”

His hands are trembling again. It seems to be a near constant state for him after everything that’s happened over the past few days, all of the revelation and anxiety and pressure that keeps swirling around in his head.

Rey keeps her gaze locked on his as she sets the apple core down on the counter. “I’ve missed you too,” she admits. “I had forgotten how lonely it was, not having someone to talk to. I mean, there’s
Finn and the Marthas, and I suppose I have polite conversation with the other Handmaids, but it’s just not the same.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t spent more time with you, but it-”

“It’s been difficult, I know. Since it happened.” She rubs her belly again. “I don’t blame you, you know. Just in case you were wondering.”

Clenching his hands, he steps forward, closing the gap between them until he could reach out and touch her face if he wanted to. “How are you feeling?”


“You seem better.” His memory flits back to a few months past, hearing about his poor Handmaid holed up in her room with sickness and fatigue. “There was a while when I wondered whether you would ever be able to get back out of bed. Not that you would need to,” he adds quickly. “I understand that the miracle of pregnancy can be quite taxing on a woman.”

“Our penance for Eve’s folly.” She shrugs. “So they say.”

One look at Rey, and Kylo throws the entire concept of Eve’s folly out the window. She looks like an ancient pagan goddess, round and glowing from within, a relic from a more free and primal time. “You look absolutely beautiful,” he breathes.

In the dim light, he swears he can see a blush darken her cheeks, but he’s not quite sure. “How have you been feeling different?” he presses. “Aside from being upright, of course.”

“So many ways. I’d hate to bore you.”

Kylo surges forward and brushes her arm with his shaking hand. “It’s not boring to me,” he blurts out. “It’s amazing and miraculous. You’re-you’re growing another person inside of you.”

“Alright then. I’m hungry, a lot.”

“I’ll get the Marthas to increase the protein content of your meals. I’ll-”

“Kylo!” Rey gives him a small smile. “It’s fine. I’ve already spoken to Maz about it. She’ll speak to you in the morning.”

“Good.” Slowly, gently, he reaches for her hand and clasps it in his, relishing the fact that she doesn’t pull away. “Anything else?”

She laughs softly. “So much more. My skin is stretching, making way for the baby. I’ve taken to rubbing kitchen oil on it to prevent the itch. If you wouldn’t mind, some lotion would be amazing, if you could manage it.”

“Consider it done.”

She’s pleased. He can tell by the way she hums lightly to herself and rubs the back of his hand with her thumb. Encouraged, he grasps her other hand in his and uses them to pull her slightly closer. “Anything else? Strange aches, pains, cravings?”

Her lashes flutter. “Aches, only a bit. No pains yet. Cravings-” She bites her tongue between her teeth, eyes darting back and forth before replying, “I mentioned the dreams, but I didn’t mention my most frequent one. It involves you.”
“Me?” His palms go sweaty again.

“Yeah.” This time she’s the one tugging at him, pulling him to a secluded corner of the kitchen, right next to the door to the back hall. “You’re in it, and you’re kissing me and t-touching me.”

Oh.

Kylo’s not sure how to process this information. He’s so used to the clinical act of procreation paired with the animalistic lust of the male sex drive, so the idea that Rey, fiery but innocent and womanly Rey, was having dreams about him touching her is just-

He feels a twitch in his pants, and his face flushes crimson.

“Harter says this is totally normal, that many women feel this way because of the different hormones in their bodies, but I honestly don’t know what to do about it.”

“Y-you told Harter?”

Her eyebrows fly up. “No everything! Just that I was having some strange dreams, and I was blushing so I guess she caught on. Anyway, that’s pretty much it, aside from the leaking-”

“D-do you need any help? With it?” Kylo is torn between wanting the floor to open up and swallow him whole and wanting to stay in this moment forever, hovering between the possibility of rejection, and the possibility that, for once in his life, someone may actually want him, may actually need him.

Her gaze is steely and determined. “Yes,” she admits.

His hands feel like lead weights at the end of his arms. “What do I do?”

She’s already moving, fingers hiking up the voluminous white nightgown until it’s bunched up at her thighs. “Touch me.” One hand reaches out to grab his, and places it at the apex of her legs. “Here.”

The first thing he notes is that it’s warm and wet and slippery and oh Lord, he has no idea what to do. Awkwardly, he clutches Rey to his body with one arm while clumsily wiggling his index and middle finger around until she snorts with a mixture of frustration and laughter. “Not there,” she breathes into his shoulder. “Here.”

Her smaller hand grasps his larger one and tugs until his middle finger is situated a bit higher, resting on a smooth nub that he recognizes from his time studying his anatomy textbooks. Ever so gently, he swirls his finger around and is rewarded by a soft moan from Rey. He swirls more, stroking the skin around it while caressing her hair with his other hand, his eyes fixed on the way her cheeks redden and her lips are slightly parted.

“Yes, w-wanted this so much ;,” she whispers. “C-couldn’t do this by myself, needed you so much.”

It’s as if she’s in his head, echoing the words he’s been dying to hear. Skin crawling with pleasure, he lowers his mouth in an attempt to kiss her, but she pulls away and mumbles, “More, inside, please.”

He complies, moving his middle finger down to her warm, swollen passage while his thumb continues rubbing. She feels amazing, so much wetter and softer than she’s ever felt during their monthly congress. It makes his heart clench in his chest, aching over a past he would have never picked for them, but instead of dwelling, he focuses on the way she’s panting, writhing against his firm body as he holds her against the wall, how she’s worrying her plush bottom lip between her teeth, how her forehead is wrinkled in concentration as she grasps for something so tantalizingly out
of reach.

“Oh K-kylo!” Suddenly, she clenches around him, eyes fluttering shut as a wave of pleasure courses through her body. Her fingers grip the sleeves of his uniform, letting her nightgown pool around his arm still working between her thighs.

After a couple of seconds, she shakes herself off, wiggling uncomfortably until he extricates his hand from under her gown and wipes it off on his pants. She glances down, noticing his situation.

“Should I-?” she wonders halfway until she interrupts herself with a huge yawn.

He smiles. “Don’t worry about me. Go to sleep.”

“But-”

This time, she lets him lean down and place a gentle kiss on her forehead. “I’m fine. Go to sleep. Unless you need anything else?”

She’s obviously thinking, he can tell by the way her eyes are darting around again. Finally, she shakes her head, sliding out from against the wall to stand in front of the door to the hall. “I’m fine now, thanks. I’ll-I’ll let you know if I need anything else, okay?”

He’s frozen in place as he watches her leave. His heart has never thumped so hard; it’s almost painful against his chest. Vaguely he’s aware of his own arousal straining in his pants, but it’s a distant second to the miracle of Rey, his Rey, shuddering against him, because of him. He’s been on the battlefield, been married, led soldiers to kill and die and yet now, in the corner of his kitchen, in the middle of this night, now he truly feels like a man.

Chapter End Notes

Happy May the 4th/Revenge of the 5th (depending on where you live)! It must be a Star Wars miracle that I’ve finally updated.

A couple of things:
1. The chapter count has increased from 10 to 11 to account for some plot points that I was trying to squish into this chapter. Honestly, that’s one of the reasons why this chapter has been so delayed; I was trying to include EVERYTHING so that I could conceivably wrap it up with only one more chapter, and finally I just decided to wrap it up so i could post something.

2. The other main reason this chapter took pretty much 4.5 months to complete is because I am currently pregnant, and the first trimester is no joke! For the first two and a half months, my laptop screen was giving me extreme motion sickness, so most of this was actually written in a paper notebook. Luckily things have now evened out and I have been blessed so far with a lot more energy.

Thank you all so much for your patience, and I’ll see you again soon (hopefully!) with part two of this chapter. If you would like to pop by my tumblr and say hello, the link is in my ao3 profile :)
His office is an absolute mess. Papers strewn everywhere, folders stuffed with meeting briefings stacked atop ratty old novels and dirty plates. It’s indicative of his mind, really; his thoughts are jumbled and his patience stretched thin, Rey’s quickly progressing pregnancy weighing heavy in his thoughts.

“You know I can clean this,” Maz comments from the doorway. Her eyes scan the chaos. “And I won’t tell anyone your secrets, I promise.”

Kylo snorts. “Right. Like your words have any weight with me after everything that’s happened.”

Her already small eyes go even narrower behind her glasses. “Listen here, boy,” she hisses, glancing both ways to ensure the hallway is otherwise deserted. “You know as much as I that the only reason we’re still here is to look after you. For your parents.”

He refuses to look at her, and instead focuses his gaze on a decorative clock perched on a bookshelf across from him. “My father is Commander Snoke.”

“Ha!” She folds her thin arms across her chest. “I’ll wait for you to repeat that until it sounds like you believe it.”

She flashes him a flat, unimpressed stare, then rolls her eyes and retreats back down the hall.

Kylo lets out a huff of breath. His body slumps down into this chair, eliciting a creaky groan from the aged wood and upholstery. Heart thumping, he stares down at the mess of jumbled dates and coordinates scrawled across his notebook.

If his calculations are correct, Mayday will be shipping off another load of traitors within the week. He’s observed the shipping patterns, the drivers, the inventories, everything he could get his hands on, just to make sure he’s correct.

It’s poetic, really. The supply runs themselves are already illicit, born out of necessity when Gilead’s topsoil turned to dust nearly fifteen years ago. Rampant anti-globalization had a dug a pit too desolate for the elite to handle so, in desperation, back door deals had been struck with surrounding countries to ensure that Snoke and others could continue to enjoy their raspberries and avocados. It had been all too easy for Mayday to sneak in an occasional extra supply run to the north or south, given that the shipments themselves were on a need to know basis.

Kylo had poked around a couple of weeks ago, back when he had suspected the last batch of smuggled Handmaids had left, checking to see which Angels showed any sign of nervousness. Fortunately for him, one of the cagiest Angels had been the one assigned to his household, his driver Finn. The other man had held his stare just a bit too long, responded to his questions with a bit too much force behind his voice. The most damning detail had been his increased attention to Rey and her progressing pregnancy, more attention than would be warranted by a normal member of his household. Finn watches her like she’s a ticking bomb, just ready to fall to pieces at a moment’s notice.

Not that Kylo doesn’t do the same, as long as he’s being honest with himself. With every week, her body grows and her steps slow, and his heart aches to see her so burdened. Still, she’s as radiant as
ever. Despite her swelling belly that seems to be weighing her down more and more each day, and the hot summer weather that gives her a perpetual glow of sweat on her brow, she bears her daily tasks with exemplary grace and beauty.

“So now what?” he murmurs to himself, still staring at his nonsensical scrawl. It’s a rhetorical question; from the moment Hux mentioned that they were looking into the inconsistencies in deliveries, no, from the moment his father made his intentions known, he’s known his end goal.

Rey. She’s the subject of his dreams, his daily musings, managing to worm her way into every corner of his battered heart. He runs his fingers down his chart of estimated future delivery dates, and dares to imagine that one day he and Rey will be able to escape this place and travel far away, to where his father’s wrinkled talons can’t touch her. And then maybe…

Maybe what? A sneering voice that sounds suspiciously like Phasma’s echoes in his overcrowded mind. You think she’ll fall in love with you? That she’ll actually choose to be with you, after everything you’ve done to her?

He can’t let himself get his hopes up. With a grunt of effort, he makes himself comfortable and pulls over a folder full of duty rosters, in the hopes that some mundane bookwork will distract his mind from its persistent, nervous thrumming.

It doesn’t.

* *

He’s around seven years old when he notices something’s off.

His mother doesn’t smile any more. Her face is solemn and lined beyond her years, her lips perpetually drawn tight. She talks in hushed whispers that seem to terminate as soon as he enters the room.

And another thing- Commander Snoke is at their house again.

Commander Snoke is at their house, and even though his mother is just a woman, she holds herself high, facing him with a steady, uncompromising gaze.

“Mrs. Solo.” The Commander addresses Leia with all of the courtesy of an outright sneer. “Is your husband not at home?”

“He’s out for the night.” Mother’s voice is smooth, yet firm. “But of course you already knew that, didn’t you?”

Snoke’s face splits into a cruel grin. “Clever as always. Too clever, that is.”

“You mean for a woman?”

Ben’s tiny hand clutch the spindles of the bannister as he ducks even lower behind the armchair currently hiding him from view. He’s always know his mother was a bit of a rebel. She talks back to his father all the time, teasing and jabbing him until he’s so angry that his nostrils flare and his falls deathly silent. It’s only the love he has for her, real, true and honest love, that stays his hand. That and her father’s exceptionally high position in the Gilead government.

Formerly high position, that is.
The Commander slinks his way into the foyer of their home. The glints of gold threaded through his uniform twinkle in the low evening light like stars in a jet black sky. Ben presses his belly against the worn floorboards and holds his breath as Snoke eyes Mother’s outfit.

“Where is your gown?”

Leia runs her finger down the lapel of her white blouse. “You caught me at an off time. Had you called ahead, I would have dressed in my best, but alas it’s currently in the wash.”

Ben knows that’s a lie. Mother almost never dresses in the modest blue dresses that all Wives must wear, not unless she’s planning on leaving the house. Instead she normally wears boy’s trousers with Father’s uniform shirts tucked in at the waist. She says it’s more comfortable, but Ben knows that’s a lie as well. She wears them for the same reason she talks back. She’s different.

Snoke’s mouth curls into a condescending smile. “I know you think you’re clever enough to get away with it, but I assure you that we know everything.”

“About my outfit choices?” Her dark eyes remain steady. “Surely a man as esteemed as yourself has better things with which to occupy his time?”

“You know what I refer to.” He almost bends in two, until his face is level with Leia’s. His voice drops to a whisper. “Your involvement with your turncoat father. The mysterious disappearing handmaids. The organization which we do not name.”

“You mean Mayday?”

Snoke flinches. “How dare-”

“It’s the end of the line, Snoke. You and I both know that nothing I say or do will change this situation.” Despite her small stature, she manages to make him take a step back. “Now just answer this for me- did Han put up a fight, at least?”

Snoke’s lip twitches. It’s enough.

Leia grins. “You didn’t get him, did you?”

“Solo’s whereabouts are immaterial.”

“Oh, I’m sure.”

Her eyes flick up to Ben’s location behind the armchair. They lock onto him, and she goes tense and pulls away, but not quickly enough. Snoke matches her stare, and laughs.

“It appears we’re being watched. Come, young Solo.”

He extends a long, skeletal finger, beckoning. His other hand reaches for something at his belt.

“Ben, NO!”

Mother’s cry is insistent, but he knows he has to obey a Commander. It’s the law. As if in a trance, Ben stands.

Then a lot of things happen. A rush behind him, as their housekeeper scoops him up in her wiry arms. The slamming of the hall closet doors against the wall, revealing Father, forehead caked with dirt and blood. Most deafening is the sound of gunshot, as Snoke shoots his pistol right at Ben’s feet.
Ben gapes back at Maz, but there’s no time for thanks. Not as Father jumps onto Snoke’s back, and yells, “Leia, RUN! Luke’s out front with the Falcon. Chewie and Wedge are with him-” He’s cut off as Snoke slams his head backwards, right into Han’s face.

Leia’s halfway to the staircase when there’s another rush of noise. Three Angels, their dark green uniforms casting shadows against the wall, emerge from the dining room, effectively blocking her from Ben. Two wrench Han off of Snoke’s back while the third wrestles Leia to the ground. Ben cries and wriggles against Maz’s arms when he sees them pull out the black bags.

“Shall we bag the boy as well, sir?”

Snoke stands. Brushing the dust off of his clothing, he looks at Ben appraisingly.

“That won’t be necessary. Leave the boy to me.”

A muffled wail erupts from Leia’s bagged mouth. One of the Angels cuffs her across the head, and she falls silent.

Ben’s little hands clench into fists. Gritting his teeth, he flails out of Maz’s grasp and bolts towards Snoke, yelling wildly. The older man doesn’t even flinch as Ben launches himself in attack, only to be knocked away by an Angel’s arm.

“Sir, are you sure we shouldn’t restrain this one? He’s quite a fighter.”

“Indeed.” Snoke kneels down until he’s face to face with Ben. “I would expect nothing less. What say you, young Solo?”

“Let my mom GO!!!” Ben screams.

“Such passion. Such spunk.” Snoke nods to the Angels, who then drag Leia outside as Ben sobs. There’s ominous silence, then a sudden gunshot followed by a sick thump.

“Mom…” Ben wavers.

“Your mother is gone, young Solo,” Snoke states, dryly. “She betrayed not only her country, but also you, her son.”

“But you killed her!” Ben spits through his tears. “YOU killed her.”

“It was the natural consequence of her stepping outside her role.” Snoke leans closer, until his breath ghosts across Ben’s face. “She wasn’t happy being your mother. She wasn’t satisfied, and that’s why she had to be punished. One day you’ll understand, and you’ll thank me for this. One day.”

“—”

It’s a damp and foggy kind of day, the kind that sticks to the wool of his uniform and chills him to the bone despite his layers. Kylo shivers and hunches in on himself, sure to protect the tiny packet of concord grapes held tightly in his hands.

His father had been away this morning, most likely at an early meeting with Hux and the stone cold harpy masquerading as his wife.
I knew my bed felt a little warmer this morning.

Fortunately one of Snoke’s Marthas had thought to save some fruit for him, which kept him from having to come home empty handed. Not that Rey would complain, of course. These days she has everything to complain about, from swollen feet to shifting hips, yet she goes about her day still as sweet as honey, cheerfully helping out the Marthas in the kitchen and still fetching groceries despite her extremely large belly.

“The doctor said it’s good to be active,” she had maintained when he caught her kneading bread one morning, flour dusted on her nose. Phasma had just nodded in response over her bowl of cereal, the roll of her eyes indicating that she found the whole experience wholly ridiculous.

The house smells of warm spices and butter when he arrives. Depositing the packet on the counter, he ducks down in front of the oven and spies something toasted and sugary baking within.

“Maz,” he cautions. “Are you sure it’s the right time for something so sweet?”

“Psst,” Maz snorts, already rinsing the grapes at the sink. “The poor girl is going to have to push your melon headed child out of her body in less than a month. She deserves something sweet.”

“Melon headed–?” If it was anyone else, he would have them hanged, but it’s been so long since he’s seen Maz’s eyes twinkle like that, like they did...before.

He tries to push all thoughts of before out of his head. Previously, it had been as easy as remembering his true childhood, his life with Snoke, and his early military life, but now with Maz and Harter tittering like they used to, and Rey swollen and beautiful with his child, it’s become harder and harder to forget the boy he once was, and the childhood he once had.

“Has she been down yet?” he asks. He busies himself with tracing symbols in the residual flour left over from Maz’s morning backing. “I’ve heard from some of the other men that the last month is often the hardest.”

Harter snorts from the corner. “Because they would be the experts.”

“I’m not privy to the titterings of women.” He ducks his head to hide the flush of embarrassment on his cheeks. “It’s not like I can walk into the Red Centre and ask the aunts about the stages of pregnancy. It’s not natural for men to know too much.”

Harter raises an eyebrow and bites her lip, obviously holding back her opinion. “Why inquire at all then?” she wonders.

“I-I need to be abreast of everything going on in my household,” he announces, puffing out his chest with what he hopes is an accurate approximation of machismo. “It’s my responsibility as the head of the house.”

“Ah yes. How very responsible of you.” She slips on a pair of oven mitts and retrieves the pastries from the oven. Steam wafts up, filling the kitchen with another pungent wave of cinnamon, and Kylo’s stomach grumbles.

The two Marthas share a look, and then suddenly a plate of food is being pressed into his hands as strong arms push him down onto a stool next to the counter. “Here, try this for us,” Maz says. “You can be our taste tester.”

“Sure, I–”
Just then, Rey clambers down the steps still in her nightgown, rubbing sleep from her eyes. “Maz, I just had the strangest dream. I…” Her voice trails off when she sees Kylo perched on the stool, chewing on a bite of fresh pastry. “Oh!”

He jumps to his feet. “R-Ofren. Good Morning.”

It’s lunacy, complete and utter nonsense, because he sees her almost every day, and yet every time feels like the first time, like he’s falling in love all over again. Adoration is written all over his face as he drops the pastry back onto its plate and steps forward. “Did you sleep well?”

“As well as can be expected.” She grimaces. “Not being able to sleep on my back has been difficult, and I keep getting woken up at night by the little one.”

She pats her belly, then nods. “This baby kicks all the time.”

His heart thumps. “Is it kicking now?”

“Oh, a lot.”

“Can I–Can I feel it?”

He shoots a look at the Marthas. Maz frowns back at him. “Well, don’t look at us. You don’t need our permission!”

Harter hums and pulls her partner towards the hall. “Maz, could you help me change the sheets in Finn’s room? You know how that best is always so hard to pull from the wall.”

Maz rolls her eyes but follows anyway, leaving the two of them alone in the kitchen. Suddenly sheepish, he blurts out, “I don’t have to feel it if you’re uncomfortable. I understand. You must have lots of people wanting to touch you all the time now.”

“Definitely more than before.”

“Than…before.” His stomach knots, like it always does now when he thinks of back before, before Rey got pregnant, before they kissed, before she pinned him in his office and clutched his knife to his throat. Intercourse with her before was his duty, yes, but now that he’s tasted true affection, he’s finally become aware of the possibility of more.

Her eyes soften. “Thank you. I-I understand what you’re trying to say, and I appreciate it. I would be fine with you touching my belly, but the baby isn’t moving right now.”

Ben squints, concerned. “Is it okay?”

“More than okay.” She lets out a soft chuckle. “Babies don’t move around all the time. They rest just like us. Speaking of rest…are you going to be in the office all day?”

“No, I’ll be out. I’m–” He stutters as he determines how much information is prudent for him to disclose. “I’m driving out to inspect a supply checkpoint. Should be back home late.” If at all.

“Oh.”

“I hope you have a good day,” he says earnestly then, in a burst of spontaneous bravery, he reaches down and clutches her hand with his. In the broad daylight of the kitchen, with Maz and Harter no doubt spying from the hall, he pulls her fingers to his mouth and brushes his lips against her knuckles.
Rey’s eyelids flutter shut. “Kylo, we–”

“I know.” He pulls her fingers away, shaking his head. “I know, I know.”

He tries to tug his hand free, but she grasps him firmly and pushes his splayed fingers against her lower belly. There’s nothing, and then something drags against the walls of her abdomen and across his hand, like a fish trying to escape the confines of her skin.

He would jump back if not for Rey’s tight grip. “Was that–?”

“The baby, yes.”

His eyes soften. “Our baby.”

She drops his hand, and steps back. “Right. Have a good day Commander,” she says softly, then darts back down the hall.

Kylo flexes his fingers and frowns to himself. It’s a sensitive topic, of course, but she’s never reacted so negatively before. Pastry abandoned, he retrieves his coat from the rack, and heads outside with a renewed vigor for today’s mission.

Finn is polishing the headlights and almost drops his cloth when he sees Kylo emerge from the house. “Sir, I wasn’t expecting you this early!”

“I have some important business to attend to,” he announces. “Take me to checkpoint 27F.”

If he wasn’t looking for it, Kylo would have missed the slight twitch at the corner of his driver’s eye. “Of course, sir.”

They’re right on the outskirts of the city when Finn asks, lightly, “Any particular reason you’re visiting an abandoned produce checkpoint, sir?”

“That’s classified information, and you know it.”

“My apologies, sir.”

Kylo’s gaze flicks up to the rear view mirror, locking with the other man’s brown eyes in a show of force. To his credit, Finn doesn’t look worried, but the atmosphere in the car shifts sideways, betraying the tension radiating with each breath.

Kylo doesn’t expect any different. It’s unusual for a high ranking Commander to visit any checkpoint outside of an official inspection, especially one as remote as 27F which, according to his calculations, hasn’t been used in almost twenty years. It’s even stranger to use one’s personal vehicle and driver for such a trip. At least three hours by car, with only a small refuelling station along the way, the trip requires them to traverse along back roads and through many miles of heavily forested wilderness.

If he had planned this better, he would have brought food. Food, and maybe a dossier of paperwork, maybe made an official trip request or something. But no, he got excited, let his emotions get the best of him, and now he’s stuck with a suspicious driver, a growling belly, and a three hour trip down bumpy backroads with his breakfast pastry left abandoned in his kitchen.

As the minutes tick by, Finn’s anxiety ratchets by degrees. He keeps glancing back at Kylo, as if he’s expecting the other man to just disappear or pull out a gun, or do something else equally dramatic. If Kylo had any doubts that this man is with Mayday, they would have dissipated; despite all of his efforts, Finn radiates tension in the set of his jaw and shoulders.
They’re a few miles away when Finn abruptly pulls over on the side of the road. Dust from the gravel plumes around them as he turns around to face Kylo, stone faced. “Look,” he says through gritted teeth. “I know that you’re not coming to this checkpoint to examine the handling of our nonexistent cabbage supplies. Either you’re here as a spy, or as a one man wrecking ball, and either way, I can’t just drive you over there like I don’t know what’s going on.” He sits up straight. “I know this may not mean much, but I know what you’re up to.”

Kylo leans back against the cracked leather seat. “Interesting. I suppose you’ve come equipped with a shovel, just in case you have to dispose of me the old fashioned way. You know, it would have been easier to just throw me into the river we passed a half hour ago.”

Finn looks smug. “Yeah, but then I would have had to do it alone.”

There’s a rustle of movement at the edge of the forest, and a flash of green uniform. Kylo spots another directly in front of the car, crouched behind a thorny bush. He looks over at Finn, who is still trembling with nervousness but seems a bit more self-assured. “So you brought me this far in order to ensure that your death will be witnessed.”

The words sound hollow even to him. Finn tilts his head. “See, that’s what I was thinking at first, but then I had another thought. Why would Commander Ren, son of Snoke, decide to follow his gut and take a car deep into the woods by himself, with seemingly no backup? And don’t pretend that we’ve been followed.” His dark eyes dart back and forth. “I haven’t detected any other vehicles on the road since checkpoint C.”

“ Seems as though you think you have me all figured out.”

“We’ve been watching you for months. I’d better have you figured out by now.”

“So you think I’m here to take you all out? With the army I’ve smuggled here in my coat pockets?”

“No.” Finn’s eyes meet his. “I think you’re really here to beg us to save Ofren. And if that’s the case, we’re way ahead of you.”

He starts up the car and takes a quick left onto a back road that’s almost completely overgrown with ferns and trees. Unconsciously, Kylo ducks as branches smack onto the windshield. Finn is unflinching, his eyes trained dead ahead.

After ten minutes of combing through the woods, they emerge in the cleared area. There’s a gate in front of them, manned by four armed guards in mottled green uniforms. They’re not dressed as typical Guardians, instead they look more like camouflaged militia dressed to blend in with their surroundings.

They pull up to the gate, and Finn rolls down the windows. “I’ve got a special delivery in the back,” he says. “We’ll need some extra handling.”

The guard frowns, and peeks into the back window. Kylo stares back, and the other man jumps. “C-commander Ren?”

“Mr. Wexley.” Kylo’s not surprised to see the nervous, round faced man. Snap Wexley’s smile was always just a bit too genuine, his eyes a bit too kind.

“Can’t say I ever expected to see you here-” Snap wrinkles his nose, “--sir.”

“The Commander is requesting some time at the checkpoint,” Finn calls out from the driver’s seat. “And who are we to ignore that request? Especially for a man in his situation.”
“What situation is that?”

“My Handmaid is pregnant,” Kylo chokes out. “And my father wants her after the child is born.”

“O-” Snap’s face twists with realization, “-OH! Well then. Commander Ren, could you please step outside of the vehicle?”

Kylo frowns, burrowing slightly into the backseat of the car. “And why is that-?”

“Don’t worry. This is how it works,” Finn explains. He twists around so that he’s facing the back. “I had to do this my first couple of times visiting the barracks. It’s a pat down for surveillance devices, a quick change, and a bag over your head, just to be safe. Easy.”

“Easy for you,” Kylo grumbles, ducking out of the car.

Snap instructs him to strip out of his black uniform, down to his undershirt and standard issue briefs. Kylo rolls his eyes and complies, suppressing his shivers as the cold forest breeze makes his leg hair stand on end.

Finn pulls a pack of black plastic cable ties from the glove compartment, and uses them to bind his wrists together as Snap watches, nervous. “How did you find out about us?” he blurts out. “Does everyone know?”

“Yes, and they sent me in as a spy,” Kylo deadpans.

“It’s just—we’ve had Commanders approach us before, to transport a child or Handmaid, but never someone as...senior as you.” Snap nods. “It’s suspicious.”

“It’s always suspicious,” Finn pulls the tie tight. “But we’ve managed to avoid being completely exposed this long, so explain how you found us and we’ll stop up this gap.”

Kylo shrugs. “I just remember my mother and father talking about this checkpoint back when I was a child. My f-father was the supervisor for this section, and he was frustrated when it got shut down. I noticed that occasional shipments through the neighboring sector have been delayed and I just...assumed. I supposed I assumed correctly.”

“Your mother and father?” Recognition dawns on Finn’s face. “You don’t mean Leia Organa and Han Solo?”

Kylo doesn’t respond, but the smug expression on his face says it all. Finn shakes his head and pulls the bag over his head, plunging the other man in darkness.

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He counts up to 1733 before the bag is unceremoniously ripped from his head, and he’s thrust face to face with someone very familiar.

“Poe.”

His dark haired former driver grins. Leaning back against the weathered concrete wall of the bunker, he drawls, “Okay, let’s get one thing straight here. Have you come as Commander Ren of the Gilead government, scion of the Sons of Jacob and all that...or are you here as someone else?”

Kyle bites his lip and shakes his head. “Don’t make me say it.”

“I’m going to make you say it.”
“Fine.” He takes in a deep breath. “I’m here as someone who needs your help. I’m here as a man who is desperate to save the woman he loves. I’m here- here as Ben Solo.”

“Ben Solo, hey?” An old man off to the side raises his eyebrows. “That’s a name we haven’t heard in a long time.”

“Alright.” Poe turns to Finn, who shrugs in response. “A bit over dramatic as usual, but okay. Should we search him again, just to be safe?”

Finn nods. “Yeah, I think so.”

So Kylo endures another five minutes of poking, prodding and scanning, which results in him being stripped to just his briefs and tied, shivering, to a chair. Seemingly satisfied, Poes drags another chair to sit across from him, arms crossed and stone faced. “Okay Ben,” he drawls, “What can Mayday do for you?”

“Rey,” Kylo breathes. “I mean Ofren. She’s pregnant.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” he responds automatically, then winces. “I mean–it’s not a good thing. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t excited in some sense, but-”

“But you know this isn’t right. You’ve woken up, smelled the coffee, all of that.” Poe shakes his head. “Then how come I don’t buy it, Ben?”

Kylo grits his teeth. “Because you’re just as stupid and stubborn as you’ve always been?”

A chorus of whistles and half chuckles echo from the crowd of bystanders that has started to gather around the two men. Poe nods.

“All right, big guy, let me tell it to you straight. You may be a Commander out there, but in here you’re just a man. A man who is heading a regime that lies to its people, who mandates rape and slaughter under the authority of ‘God’s Providence’, and who reinforces that mandate as it smuggles goods to its elite from countries it claims to be at war with. So—” He shrugs. “—keep going with that attitude, Ben.”

It stings, hearing his old name spat with such disdain from Poe’s lips. His father, Snoke, had forbidden it from their household, and now it makes him feel itchy, like an old sweater that’s a bit too small.

His discomfort is apparent, causing Poe to grin. “What, having second thoughts now, Ben? Not so determined now that you have to work with us lesser folk?”

“It’s not that. It’s...the name.”

“Would you rather I call you Commander?” Poe mocks.

“Ren is fine.”

“Okay Ren, here’s the deal. In four weeks, we have an opening on a produce truck heading north-”

“That’s too late,” Kylo interrupts. “She’s almost eight months pregnant now. She’ll be too close–”

“We can’t risk it any sooner.” Poe is stony faced, but his stare has softened considerably. “You want her to be safe, right? If we leave any sooner, it’ll rouse suspicion.”
“But–”

Finn steps forward. “It’s the only way to get her to safety.”

Kylo’s mouth goes dry. A dull ache settles into the pit of his stomach. “Fine,” he mutters. “But if something goes wrong–”

“If things go sideways, we’ll be there,” Poe vows. “Suspicion be damned. I’d rather die than endanger the grandchild of Leia Organa.”

“Oh–why not rescue her now?”

“Like I said, it’ll rouse suspicion.” Poe taps his fingers on his crossed arms, annoyed. “If everything goes well, we should be able to evacuate her with at least a 12 hour lead time, which would pretty much guarantee safe passage to the border. If we just run in and snatch her now, we’ll have the Eyes on our tail the entire way, and I don’t know how far we can push the Canadian government for clemency if we’ve been followed. But we’ll do it, if we have to.”

“What are you planning on doing then?” Finn asks from the sidelines. “How are you going to protect yourself from suspicion once Ofren is gone?”

“I–I don’t know.” Kylo sighs and shakes his head. “Don’t care.”

Poe snorts. “Such a strategic mind. No wonder Gilead still hasn’t won the war.”

Kylo glares at him. “I said I don’t care,” he spits. “And I mean it. Once she’s gone, there’s nothing left for me here.”

“You’re not concerned that you’ll be targeted?”

“What will they do?” He chuckles darkly. “I swear my wife and my father grow more tired of me every day, yet I’m here I am. I highly doubt the disappearance of my handmaid will tip either of them over the edge.”

“You’d be surprised.” Poe comments. “In fact, I’m surprised they haven’t used you as leverage yet.”

Kylo frowns. “Leverage?”

“Well, because of your mother.”

“My mother died twenty years ago,” Kylo spits. “I hardly think that my Father would consider it relevant since I’ve been under his influence twice as long as I was under hers.”

A hush falls over the gathered observers, and Poe and Finn look at each other, uncomfortable.

“Do we–?”

“Well, at this point, we probably should.”

“Should what?” Kylo looks around the room, wide-eyed, his arms straining against the restraints. “What is it?”

“It’s just—your mother.” Poe swallows. “She’s still alive. She escaped up north, and is living there with your uncle.”

A rush of—of something runs through Kylo’s entire body, leaving him gasping and nauseated. His
mother—? But that would mean—

“S-she’s been there? This entire time?” His voice is tiny, and he hates it. “But how? Why—?”

Why did she leave me?

Why did she never come back for me?

He feels small again, trapped behind the bannister watching as she’s dragged away. The feeling of Snoke’s hand on his shoulder, of his stinking breath ghosting puffs over his face, of the stiff sheets in his new bedroom...it all comes tumbling back.

His face is wet, and Poe and the rest are looking decidedly uncomfortable. Awkwardly, he wiggles in his restraints in an attempt to alleviate the sickening backflips his stomach seems to be doing. “I haven’t seen her in years,” he admits, voice gravelly with emotion. “I-Is she well?”

“Her status is none of your business, Commander,” Poe barks. His face softens. “But yes, she’s very well. In perfect health.”

Kylo lets out a tense exhale. His mother is alive. His mother is alive, and there’s hope that they can save Rey, and those two things together are enough motivation for him to keep forcing air into his lungs. “Okay,” he rasps. “What do you need me to do?”

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Kylo is hiding something.

Rey watches him pace from across the house, his black books trailing footprints in the parlour rug as she sips her chamomile tea in the dining room. He pauses every so often to murmur something to Phasma, who is pretending to do needlepoint while examining him with an appraising glare. His eyes flick to Rey, and then he resumes his pacing.

It hurts more than it should because it’s not like he’s her husband, or friend even, but still she thought they had some sort of understanding. She sees the deception in his gaze, in the way he stares at her a bit longer than he used to, and looks out the window with a furrowed brow as if he’s waiting for doomsday to fall from the sky.

Maybe it’s just the baby. Maybe his limbs tremble with nervousness anticipating the tiny bundle that will soon be in his arms. Maybe his shoulders are heavy with the responsibility of raising a future wife, soldier, Commander. Even Phasma has become a bit more tense, snapping at the Marthas for serving the food too hot, and chastising Finn for tracking some mud in the hall, but her attitude towards Rey seems mostly unchanged, if not slightly more tolerant due to her condition.

But Kylo...Kylo looks at her like she might keel over at any minute, like if he just stares at her hard enough, he’ll be able to keep her from harm.

Her teacup rattles in its saucer, causing both Kylo and Phasma to glance up at her.

Phasma delicately places her needlework down on her lap. “Is everything okay?” she asks, her voice as cold as always.

“Yes, yes, sorry. My hands, I-I wasn’t careful.”

Kylo takes three long steps towards her, then pauses. “Are you-? That is, do you need assistance? Do you require rest?”
Rey stands and waves her hands in front of herself. “I’m fine, honestly. I just put down my cup with a little too much force.”


He whirls around to face her. “Who are you to order me around, Wife?”

She stares at him, pale blue eyes unblinking. “You don’t mind though, do you Husband? Assisting the woman burdened with your child?”

“N-no, of course not.” He offers his uniformed arm, staring decidedly past Rey, who hefts herself up from the table and takes it.

They’re almost at her door when his entire demeanour changes. His shoulders slump and his face goes pale and drawn, his eyes losing the nervous glint they had earlier. “Here, let me–” he mumbles, pushing open her door and leading her inside her room with a hand on the small of her back.

She whirs on him. “What’s going on with you?” she hisses. “What are you hiding?”

“A great many things,” he counters, silently closing her door after him. “None of which pertain to you at all.”

She snorts and crosses her arms, resting them on her swollen belly. “Don’t be obtuse. You’ve been acting strange lately.”

He glances out her window, then yanks the curtains closed, as if that will do anything to prevent them from being seen or heard. “I’ve found a way out for you,” he hisses, grabbing her hand in his. “And for our baby too.”

Her stomach gives a sick lurch at his words. Escape...escape is risky. Before she may have considered it, but now it feels irresponsible, almost? Like she’s risking not only her life, but the life of the child, and it kills her to even think that. She didn’t choose this, she didn’t choose to have a baby foisted on her for nine months, but now that she’s in this situation, she feels even more trapped. It’s not just the physical weight; it’s a psychologically driven responsibility she feels to this little unborn child.

“Our baby,” she whispers. A lone tear trails down her cheek.

Instantly, he flushes and looks away. “I’m sorry that I said that. About the baby being ours. That was insensitive of me.”

“Thank you. I accept your apology,” she replies automatically.

He presses his hands on her shoulders, easing her down onto her bed as he explains. “If everything goes to plan, you should be hidden away in time for the baby’s arrival.”

“But what about you?” she blurs out. “You didn’t mention—”

His eyes flick down to the floor, avoiding her gaze once more.

She feels the bottom drop out of her gut as her mind goes blank with panic. It’s not that she loves him, or even likes him that much. No, it’s more about the familiarity of his sad eyes and how steady and protected she feels when she’s wrapped in his arms. He’s one of her jailors, yes, but he sees her for who she is, and she can’t lose that. “Kylo, you can’t stay here!”
“I have to,” he mutters. “They can’t make the space for me. Can’t afford it.”

“But they have to take you!” she insists. “They have to!”

He grits his teeth. “No. They don’t. And calm down, this can’t be good for your condition.”

“Fuck my condition,” she spits, relishing the way his pupils dilate when he hears her say that forbidden word. “They can’t—can’t expect me to just leave you behind. Wasn’t your family involved in the rebellion?”

His shoulders stiffen. “How did you know that?”

“It was part of the—well, when I was assigned here, I—” With a grunt of effort, she reaches under her mattress and pulls out the slightly crumpled file folder containing all of the information about her placement. “Before you say anything, I know I’m not supposed to have this, but it was given to me at the Red Centre, and the Aunts looked at me like they knew what they were doing.”

She points to a line of text. “It says here that your father is Snoke, but when I showed Maz and Harter said you’re actually related to Anakin Skywalker, and they talked about Luke and Leia.”

He reacts like he’s been slapped. “They told you this? And they didn’t report that you had all of this information?” He reaches to take the folder and she tugs it back, protectively, her face twisting into a frown. Retreating, he raises his hands in surrender. “I’ll give it back, I promise.”

“I’m not telling you this to get them into trouble. If something happens to them—”

“Rey.”

“Please don’t hurt them, Kylo.” Her eyes well with tears. “Please.”

“I’m not going to hurt them, I swear it.”

His eyes flit over the paperwork, growing wider and wider the further he reads. “This is bad,” he mumbles, mostly to himself. “This is really bad. He must know you have this.”

The ‘he’ is implicit, unsaid. Rey grabs the end of her bedframe as a fresh wave of nervous nausea rolls over her. “So, this is a set up then?” she wonders. “When the Aunts gave it to me, they didn’t seem nervous or anything. They knew they weren’t messing up, they knew that they were giving me this and I—” She chokes. “They’ve been manipulating me all along.”

Kylo drops the folder onto her bedspread and gently squeezes her shoulders, turning her to face him. “Did you tell anyone you could read? At the Red Center? Did you tell anyone?”

She wracks her brain, and comes up with nothing. “No, no, I mean I don’t know! I don’t know what I did or who I told anything to!”

Her mind is in freefall, names, faces, everything whirling and dropping like autumn leaves. She hates this, hates feeling so used and helpless again after fighting to find her sense of worth in this disgusting, God-forsaken world. She needs...she needs to leave. He’s right; she needs to get out of here before the country swallows her whole, swallows her child whole and spits out their bones. But still...

“Tell them I’m not leaving without you.”

He sighs, exasperated. “Rey, I can’t just—”
“No.” She grabs the folder and pushes it back into his hands. “Show them this. Show them that we’re being targeted for...for something, and they’ll have to let you go. Promise me.”

He looks down at her with watery brown eyes, so rich and warm, contrasting with the colourless void of his clothing and his anxious, porcelain skin. “I promise,” he breathes, then reaches up to tuck a sweaty piece of hair behind her ear. “If it means you’ll be safe, then I promise.”

She’s still not sure she can trust him, not with this, but it’s enough that she lets him leave her room, the folder tucked into his coat for safekeeping.

Chapter End Notes

uhhhh, okay, so that was a while.
I'm sorry if this chapter came off weird or disjointed it's been....over a year in the making? I apologize SO MUCH for the huge wait; I don't really want to get into it here, but I was in a bit of a place after the birth of my son, and couldn't get into the setting and the headspace to write this fic, but I PROMISE I'll complete it [hopefully] soon. Thank you so, so much for your patience and continued encouragement :)
Ben II

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She hates being left in the dark. *Hates* it, even though logically she knows it’s for the best. It’s not like they can keep discussing their escape around the house, and it’s not like they can meet anywhere else, so she’s left alone with her thoughts as Kylo stomps up and down the halls, harsh and grumpier than usual.

Once she enters her ninth month of pregnancy, she’s essentially confined to her bedroom on doctor’s orders and only allowed a short, ten minute walk around the yard to make sure her muscles don’t atrophy. It’s infuriating, especially for someone like Rey who is so used to being active and useful. The boredom, coupled with her persistent anxiety and hip pain, makes her days agonizingly long.

Her only respite is in the form of Phasma, who has taken it upon herself to visit Rey’s room several times a day to ‘chat’. Usually, she brings up meals for the two of them, then pulls out her needlework and embroiders while droning on about meaningless neighbourhood gossip. Rey eats slowly, savouring her food and avoiding the other woman’s critical gaze.

“...and Bazine assured me that diapering *shouldn’t* be an issue, even though I simply detest the idea of it and have half a mind to foist all of that nonsense on the Marthas. It’s done quite often, you know.”

“Mmhmm,” Rey mumbles, taking a miniscule bite of creamy porridge.

“Things are changing, but not how you think,” Phasma continues. Her voice has gone lower, quieter. “Woman no longer need to feel relegated to the nasty business of caring for children.”

Rey pulls her spoon from her mouth and sets it down, soundlessly, on her breakfast tray. “I-I don’t quite understand what you’re referring to?”

“Oh, of *course* you don’t my dear.” Phasma’s mouth falls into an exaggerated pout as her blue eyes go wide. “You’re the picture of innocence, aren’t you? Such a perfect little Handmaid.”

Rey’s eyes flick over to her closed door, then back down to her bowl of porridge. “Please, I must be misunderstanding, I–”

“Don’t.” The ‘t’ sound catches on Phasma’s gritted teeth, harsh and unpleasant. “Don’t act stupid with me. I know who you are. The minx sent to seduce my husband and drive him into the arms of Mayday.”

Mouth suddenly sour, Rey faces her head on and calmly states, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Phasma hums. “There’s *nowhere* to turn for you. For any of you.” A smirk springs from her lips. “I’m sure you think that the Rebellion is behind every closed door and veiled window, but I assure you that *nothing* happens in this district without Snoke’s knowledge.”

“Under His eye,” Rey murmurs. “You sure seem to know a lot about Snoke’s operations. A lot...for a Wife.”

Phasma freezes then, slowly but surely, her face splits into a wide grin.”Ah yes well...all husbands
are assigned a Wife who will compliment their skills and fulfill their needs and some husbands have
different needs than others. The Commander, for example. You and I both know that he requires a
Wife with a...particular skill set.”

Rey nods but stays silent.

“In the same way, I suppose our leaders decided that he also requires a particular Handmaid.
Curious, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so.” Her throat has gone dry, but she feels frozen under Phasma’s watchful eye.

“Well, I’m happy we’re on the same page now. I’d hate to have you think that this government doesn’t care expressly about your
situation. I assure you, Snoke and the rest are deeply invested in you and your child.”

She smiles then, cool and calculated as usual. Rey can only watch as Phasma picks up the tray with
her half eaten breakfast and walks out the door without another word. Her head spins madly as she
tries to recount every word, every inflection of the Wife’s cryptic conversation.

Was it meant to be friendly? Threatening? She’s leaning towards the latter, simply because her
patience and capacity for trust is virtually nonexistent at the point, when she’s the most vulnerable
and helpless she’s been in her life. She hates this. She hates the stiffness in her joints, and the heavy
ache of her belly, the way it presses into her organs and makes her feel like a shell of her former self.
Most of all, she hates the heavy red tent of a gown she’s still forced to wear, even though she’s
cooped up in her room away from prying eyes. Phasma has provided nothing else for her, and she’s
not about to ask.

Her day oozes past, thick and stuffy as she sinks further and further in her bed. In a moment of
temporary insanity, she wishes the quilt and lumpy mattress would swallow her whole to put her out
of her misery. The room is so hot, so sequestered and deathly quiet, with no distractions other than
the swirls of uneven plaster on the ceiling and the humdrum neighbourhood life outside of her
window. Occasionally, she can hear a murmur of conversation from downstairs, but it’s usually too
quiet to make out anything and only serves to remind her that life is rolling along without her.

It’s past supper, the sun just setting behind the trees, when she hears the deep rumble of Kylo from
somewhere in the kitchen. It’s not totally unusual; she knows now that he chats with the Marthas
fairly often, especially while his wife is out of the house. What’s new is the way the rumbling gets
louder, the way his footsteps thump closer, up the stairs and down the hall until there’s a soft knock
on her door.

“Ofren?”

Rey straightens up, wincing as her stupid hood squished up against the headboard of her bed. “Come
in.”

He has to duck just a bit to get through the doorway. He’s only been in her room a handful of times,
and on every occasion he’s contrasted violently with the setting, his black clothes and looming frame
too big and dark for her dingy white prison. With a gloved hand, he softly shuts the door behind him,
then sits down at the foot of her bed. The entire frame squeaks in protest.

“She’s gone for the night.” He looks tired. His eyes are drooping slightly and the expression lines
around his mouth are deeper than she’s seen them before. “A birth. Thanisson’s.”

“Right.” Rey’s throat goes tight. She lets out a nervous chuckle. “Can’t wait!”
His face pales. “You’ll be long gone before then.”

She thinks back to Phasma’s face, to her knowing little smirk and the glint in her ice cold eyes. “I’m not so sure about that now,” she murmurs. “I think...I think your Wife knows.”

“Knows what?”

“That you’re planning on smuggling me out. She mentioned earlier, something about the government watching us and–”

He straightens up. “That’s nonsense. If they’ve been aware, they would have raided the house earlier.”

“No, no.” Heart thumping, she throws off her quilt and shuffles across the bed until she’s next to him. “It was different, this time. It was like she was trying to tell me something with her eyes.”

“What she was trying to do is manipulate you. That’s all she does,” he spits, petulantly.

“Listen to me.” Rey tugs his arm, forcing him to look her in the eye. “I know she’s somehow part of Snoke’s military, and I know she’s been assigned to you so she can spy on you. I’m not stupid, and I won’t be dismissed. It was different this time, she–”

“How do you know all of this?” Kylo’s face twists, like he’s in pain. “Were you sent to spy on me as well? Is this your way of telling me that you’re all in this together, that you’re all manipulating me to...” Abruptly, he closes his mouth and lets his head drop into his hands. “I apologize,” he mumbles. “It’s...I don’t know, it’s like there’s something wrong with me lately. All the stress; I can’t help but feel like I’m missing something.”

He props himself back up, and stares at her. “I need to keep you safe. I need to keep both of you safe.”

There’s a sick ache in her chest, like her heart is cracking in two. “I know,” she breathes. “I know you’re stressed and I...I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.”

“It’s not enough though,” he pants. “It’s not enough, it’s never enough.”

“I know,” she repeats, pressing even closer to him. Her knee bumps his thigh and he flinches. “And maybe it won’t be, but I need you to let yourself trust me. Please, Kylo.”

His eyes are wide and glassy. Solemnly, he takes one of her small, pale hands in his and gently squeezes it. “I promise. And thank you so much. You’re...so much more than I deserve. So much better than I ever expected anyone to be, you are–” He raises her hand to his lips and brushes her fingers with a soft kiss “–perfect. You’re perfect, Rey.”

She doesn’t know how true his words are, only that they’re true to him, and that’s enough for her. The room seems to melt away from her as she feels her heart swell, feels the cracks and fissures patch themselves together when he shyly drops another kiss on her knuckles. So much has been taken from her over her life, so much so that she sometimes feels like there’s nothing left of her but a brittle shell, but at this moment she knows she has so much more. She has a future, she has a place, and above all else she has someone in this world that’s willing to fight for her.

So she pulls her hand away, stands in front of him and, with trembling fingers, she reaches for the hem of her scarlet gown and begins to tug it up her body.

“N-no.” He scrambles for the fabric, trying to pull it back over her with equally shaking hands. “No,
Rey, you don’t– you don’t have to do this.”

She pauses. “And you didn’t have to do any of this. You didn’t have to help me.” She places her hands on his shoulders and lightly pushes him, so that he’s seated on the bed before her. “You didn’t have to... but you did.”

Shaking his head, he tries to stand, but he’s unable to fight against her firm grip. “I did what I had to I– I can’t let him hurt you.”

She rests a soft kiss on his damp forehead. “And before that, you–”

He tenses. “I should have refused,” he spits. “I’m so sorry, I should have refused before.”

“You took no pleasure in it,” she murmurs.

Shaking his head, he tries to stand again and fails. “No, no, I did like it, I did, and I hurt you.”

“Hush.” Satisfied that he’s not going to move, she takes a step back and resumes tugging off her scarlet gown. It drops to the ground with a soft whump, exposing her taut belly, bisected with a tan line through her navel. Vaguely, she realizes that this is the first time he’s actually seen the fruits of his labour, and she wonders what he thinks of it, in all of it’s veined, bulging, stretched marked glory.

Judging by his face, it’s the most mesmerizing thing he’s ever seen.

Next, she tugs at the strings of her winged hood and pulls it off of her head, groaning when the cool air hits her scalp. It feels strange to stand in front of him, clad in only her plain white bra and briefs, but it feels strangely right as well, like she’s taking back a piece of herself that’s been stolen from her.

Kylo’s nostrils flare as she reaches behind her back to undo her bra clasp. “N-no,” he repeats, breathless. “No, you don’t have to do this, you don’t have to.”

“I know.” She takes in a deep breath, steadies herself, then drops her bra, revealing her swollen, leaking breasts to his wide eyed gaze. “I want to.”

It hasn’t been what she had imagined as a young girl as she sounding out the words in half-burned romance novels. She would whisper words like ‘quim’ and ‘cock’ under her breath like prayers and dream of being loved and cherished like the heroines in those books. Back then she imagined some faceless, nameless man with strong arms and a soft heart, a man who would hold her like she was the most precious thing in his world and make love to her with a pure and gentle grace. She imagined him laying her down on a soft mattress filled with feather pillows, kissing his way down her body with lips that were just slobbery enough to leave marks.

It hasn’t been like that at all. Not at all, no love, no affection, only feather pillows under someone else’s head as she laid back and took it, hard and fast and painful. She dwells on that a bit now, as she struggles to tug off her underwear. She can’t bend over without falling, so she’s left trying to drag it down her leg with the toe of the opposite foot, but then it gets stuck on her knee and it’s so, so frustrating but then–

“Here. Let me.”

Kylo slides off the bed and, kneeling on her tattered rag rug, gently slips her underwear down her legs, his fingers lingering on the fabric to avoid touching her skin. She steps out of him and kicks them aside, then steps back so she can see his face.
He’s crying.

Part of her breaks inside, but the other part, the practical part, is grumbling that they don’t have time for his emotional breakdown, not when the Wife could come back any minute, so she prods his shoulder, nudging him back onto the bed.

At first he doesn’t move, content to snuffle back his mucus as he stares at her dirty panties. “I’m sorry,” he whispers.

“You said that already.” She nudges him again. “Now get on the bed.”

Slowly, he lifts his head up and stares at her, fresh tear tracks streaming down his face. “You really want to...after...?”

There’s so much swirling around her brain, so many feelings and rationalizations for why she craves him under her and In her. The hormones, likely, plus the need for closeness. She can’t deny there’s a part of her that craves the sight of him pinned, panting and helpless, underneath her. A smaller part wants to make him feel good, as a thank you for everything he’s done, but for the most part, she wants to do it because she can choose to do it.

So instead of trying to rationalize or explain it, she just says, “Yes.”

Finally, he scrambles up, shucking his clothes with military-honed efficiency. “Are-are you sure it’s safe?” he asks, garbled as he tugs off his undershirt. “We’re not going to hurt the baby if we–?”

She snorts as she waddles up to the bed. “It’s fine. The baby is all protected in here.” Rubbing her tummy, she gingerly hoists herself onto the single bed, steadying herself as he shifts around underneath her. “The womb protects it.”

“Praise be,” Kylo chokes out as he leans up against her pillow. “Still, I’m not sure we–”

“Do you not want to?” she asks, frowning. “Because you know the last thing I would want is to force you.”

He ducks his head, his cheeks flaming. “I do want to. I want...have wanted this for so long.”

It’s awkward and a bit uncomfortable to maneuver herself on top of him, coupled with the strange shyness of seeing him laid out completely naked before her. Stripped of his regular black uniform he seems shockingly pale, and is muscled and scarred from his years of service. Her gaze goes lower, past the sparse hair below his belly to his hard cock jutting up between her spread legs. It’s less scary than she imagined it, more pink and needy than the instrument of violation that she experienced before. Curious, she reaches down to touch it, and he whimpers.

“S-sensitive,” he hisses.

“Oh.” She does it again, just a brush of her fingers against the soft, taut skin. “Did it hurt you then...before?” She looks up at him, eyes locked onto his glassy stare.

His lip quivers, and he shrugs. “Yes, for a bit at the beginning. I knew it wasn’t supposed to feel that way. I don’t know if it’s ever felt right, to be honest.”

Enthralled, she traces the shape of his cock with a fingertip, mesmerized as a bead of clear liquid leaks out. He groans underneath her, his head thrown back and hips bucking slightly under hers. It’s an amazing feeling, to be naked and so powerful after being captured and trained and berated and hoarded away up in this tiny room. Encouraged by his pleasured noises, she wiggles back onto his
thighs and wraps her hands around him.

“I could really hurt you, like this,” she breathes.

His fingernails dig into the bedspread underneath them. “You could.”

“I could make you pay for what you did to me.”

She squeezes, just a bit, and he tenses.

“Y-you could. You should.” His Adam’s apple trembles as he swallows. “Please,” he whispers, eyes misting with tears.

“Oh shut up. You’re ridiculous.” Giving his cock a final tug, she lugs herself back up his body.

“D-do you forgive me?” He’s pathetic, whimpering under her with wide eyes. “Please, please Rey, I’m so sorry.”

“I told you to shut up.” She hoists herself up, just high enough to ease the tip of him into her, then slowly lowers herself down, thighs shaking. It’s...so different. So different because instead of a burning, red hot sear of him splitting her apart there’s only the sensation of tension, then release, like stretching her shoulders after a long day of being hunched over.

She loves this. The sensation of him caged between her thighs, twitching and whimpering with every lazy roll of her hips makes her feel like a warrior, a goddess...a wife. Someone with a real connection to the man beneath her, someone with influence and understanding, who loves and appreciates someone, and is loved in return. It’s primal, surging through her veins and pooling deep in her belly, stirring her blood with the need to tear him apart, piece by piece.

“Kylo,” she groans, running her fingers against his bare chest. “Kylo, I need–”

He shakes his head quickly, almost violently, against her scratchy bedspread, his eyes screwed shut. “B-ben,” he stammers. “Please, call me Ben, please.”

She freezes. “What?”

“My name.” He looks like he’s in pain, like the effort of speaking while she’s motionless above him is ripping at his soul. “My real name is Ben.”

Ben. It fits him, more so than Kylo ever did, more so than the Commander. It makes him seem younger, and more human. “Ben,” she breathes in between small, panting breaths. “Ben, touch me, please.”

Somehow his shaking fingers find their way to the junction of her legs, pressing against her as her cunt stretches around him. It’s awkward; her belly is so swollen that there’s barely any room for his hand between them, but it’s enough that he’s trying to take care of her, fumbling and gasping even as his own pleasure threatens to overtake him.

“Ben,” she groans again. The name against her lips hums in harmony. It feels right on her tongue, lush and warm and buzzing against her lips. She feels so full, her womb, her blood thrumming under her skin, the way his cock stretches her open and wet and raw. There’s a twinge in her belly, then the twisting sensation of getting closer, closer, so close and then–

She comes with a rush, shoving her hand into her mouth at the last minute to muffle her moans. Ben gasps underneath her, no doubt surprised by the small gush of fluid seeping out from where they’re
joined. His hips stutter a couple more times, his face twisting in a mix of pleasure and pure agony.

He comes with her name on his lips and her hand pressed over his heart.

In hindsight, it was all too good to last.

Her daily stroll is brightened when, by chance, she sees Ofhux across the street, heading out to retrieve her household’s daily groceries. With a quick glance at Maz, who is playing her minder today, she waddles the short distance to the other woman, whose eyes grow round when she sees Rey’s large belly.

“You look...wow!” Ofhux gulps. “Praise be.”

“Praise be,” Rey parrots. She falls into step next to her friend. “It’s so good to see you.”

“A great blessing.” Ofhux nods at her belly. “In addition to the one for your household. Are the Commander and his Wife excited.”

It’s not gossip, not really. Sure, they’re not supposed to talk about the families their assigned to, but they do it enough that it doesn’t seem out of place, even when Ofhux’s eyes glint with an extra dose of curiosity. “The Wife has been having breakfast with me every morning, and sharing some conversation. The Commander is...nervous. Doing his best to account for every possibility.”

“Yes, I heard,” Ofhux hums. “Our mutual friends told me he’s been quite insistent about giving his child the future he or she deserves.”

“Such a blessing that he’s been afforded such opportunities.” Rey’s voice is low and even, but beneath it her belly is twisting into knots. “I should very much like to thank our mutual friends for their generosity.”

“Soon.”

They’re almost at the gate when they hear the thumping clatter of boots behind them. Rey frowns, grabbing Ofhux’s arm to stop her as she turns herself around to see the source of the commotion. It’s the Commander. Ben, his face white as ash and expression sick.

“Commander Snoke. He’s wanting to see us immediately,” he rasps.

Rey frowns at him, but all he does is nod slowly even though his eyes are wide and anxious. He says it’s only a meeting, but his entire body screams that it’s something more, something dangerous and possibly deadly. Her hand drops to her abdomen to cradle the fluttering life there. “That’s strange. What on Earth could he want with me?”

“What he wants is none of your concern.”

She reels at the dark tone of his voice. She knows it’s only for the benefit of Ofhux and any eavesdroppers, but it still makes her feel like absolute garbage. Her stomach clenches, and she turns to Ofhux. “My apologies.”

The other woman’s expression goes blank. “Of course. Would you like me to pass on your apologies to our mutual friends? They were wanting to socialize later this week...maybe you wish to meet earlier?”

Rey’s breath catches in her throat. She feels Ben’s hand on her elbow, urging her away, and she
nods. “Yes, yes, if you could. Please let them know that Commander Snoke has called us in for an urgent meeting.”

“Yes.” Ofhux nods. “Blessed be the fight”

Rey frowns at her. “O-of course. Yes.”

The other woman turns and marches away, her scarlet robes billowing out behind her. Rey feels the urge to reach out, to wrap her fingers in the trailing cloth because she’s not ready for this. She didn’t even get to say goodbye, and now she’s on the cusp of something big and all she feels is a gross, cramping anxiety in the pit of her belly.

“Come,” Ben insists, tugging her back towards the neighbourhood. “He’s waiting for us.”

The muscles in her legs tingle. Run, run, run away, her traitorous mind whispers. There’s the squeak of leather on leather as his grip tightens on her arm, almost firm enough to be painful, and she’s struck by the idea that he’s scared she’s going to try and escape. Even though it would be certain death, what with her huge belly and lack of resources, he knows she’s stubborn enough to do it, and the thought must terrify him.

“What would happen,” she wonders. “If we didn’t go?”

“Not here,” Ben spits through gritted teeth. “Not here, not now.”

“Then when? What if this is our last chance to leave this place?”

“It’s just a meeting.” He doesn’t even convince himself, wincing as he lies. “It will all be fine.”

She’s not sure it’s even been fine, or ever will be fine. “I suppose I have no choice then,” she says, her voice dull and defeated. “Take me to him.”

“I-I’m sorry,” he whispers. He loops her arm in his, letting his fingers linger in the crook of her elbow. “It’s will all be fine though, I swear it.”

“You can’t--”

He grits his teeth, and she sees a flash of something in his eyes. Something new...something dangerous.

“I’ll make it fine. Just follow my lead.”

Chapter End Notes

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The first thing she notices is the temperature. It’s warm inside Commander Snoke’s house, almost stiflingly so, a suffocating contrast to the crisp weather outdoors. The interior of the house is painted stark white, with white marble tile on the floor. It reflects the sunlight beautifully, while still feeling remarkably sterile.

“You grew up here?” she whispers, conscious of how her voice bounces off of the naked walls.

Ben shrugs, eyes fixed ahead. “For the most part, yes.”

“It doesn’t seem like a home for children.”

He pauses then, just enough to look back at her with dull, haunted eyes. “No children. Just me.”

His fingers loop into her robes to tug her forward. While she initially thought the house was deserted, she can now spot the telltale signs of activity, a hissed instruction here, a fleeting glance of green there. It’s as if the Marthas have made it their duty to be seen as little as possible, and Ben’s mother even less so.

That is, if he even has a mother. She frowns. “Does the Commander have a wife?”

Ben hums, directing her right towards a hallway off of the main sitting room. “He did, yes.”

“What was she like?”

“She was...nice.” Grimacing, he leads her down another seemingly endless hallway. “Strict, but fair. A true believer in the government and in Providence. He...she wasn’t treated well. Wasn’t respected. He married her because she was from an influential family, even though she was far too smart for someone like him, and he berated her appearance and her background daily. She—” He stops, suddenly, right outside a set of ornately carved wooden doors. Turning to face her, he reaches out a single finger and lightly traces it along her cheek. “—she killed herself,” he breathes. “She was brave and strong and it was her only way to escape him. She— she deserved better.”

His hand is on the handle when Rey stops him, gently. “What was her name?”

He manages a small, sad smile. “Her name was Rae.”

The door creaks loudly as he tugs it open, revealing a large, open room, housing only a heavy wooden desk and office chair behind it. In said chair sits Commander Snoke, hunched over and frail, dressed in the same black uniform as Ben, with additional glints of gold trim. He’s gaunt, like a corpse that’s been dug up mid-decay, and she feels a chill run up her spine.

“Ah.” His voice is ragged and hollow. “My son.”

The walls are covered in heavy scarlet drapes, the exact same hue as her robes. It’s odd that in a house so bright and spacious he would choose to surround himself in suffocating fabric folds but, judging by how grumpy and wizened he appears, he doesn’t strike her as the type who enjoys sunshine. It’s such a waste of beauty.
With a hand at her waist, Ben pushes her forward, deeper into the dusty red room. Her belly feels heavier than usual, like someone has strapped a physical weight to her abdomen in an effort to keep her still.

The closer she gets to Snoke, the more she feels the cruelty emanating from his deceptively fragile form. He stares at her, hungry, like she’s a piece of meat for his consumption. “So close,” he murmurs, his voice oozing from his mouth as pus from a wound. “So round and fertile.”

“I have done as you’ve requested,” Ben says. His hand presses into Rey’s back hard enough to bruise. “I’ve brought her for your inspection.”

“That you have.” Snoke casually flicks his finger towards the door. “Now you may go.”

Rey chokes in shock, but his hand doesn’t leave her back. “I would rather stay. She is carrying my child, after all.”

“Carrying your child. Yes, I see, of course. Not because you promised her safety to those pathetic rebel friends of yours, eh boy?”

She stiffens, and it takes every ounce of her strength to not turn her head, to keep her eyes fixed on the disgusting pile of a man in front of her, but by Snoke’s gasp of delight and his cruel smile, she can tell Ben’s face has given it all away.

“You stupid boy. Did you honestly think that you, a disappointing mess of a son, would be able to fool me? As we speak, my Guardians have surrounded this house and are camped out on the grounds, awaiting the arrival of your precious Mayday.”

“No,” Rey breathes. “There’s no possible way—”

“That I could know about your little conversation earlier with that pathetic girl? Ofhux, correct? Ah yes, how covert you were with your code words, how stealthy and smart you think you are.” He stands, stalking around until he’s right in front of her, leaning and grinning with gold capped teeth. “You think you’re so special, and for once in your pathetic, pitiful life, you’re correct.”

She wants to kill him. Rage is bubbling up from deep within her, pent up after so many years of neglect and struggle and abuse and rape and now it’s struggling to escape, trapped beneath her skin as she stands, helpless, before his looming form.

“I chose you,” he hisses. “When you were still a sniveling rat on the streets. I chose you because you’ve always fought for survival, you’ve always done what it takes to keep going. I chose you because I knew my useless oaf of a son wouldn’t be able to resist saving you.”

He says it like it’s a curse word.

“How do you think you got your illicit folder of information? Did you really think it was a coincidence that it was given to you, a woman who can read? No, you just needed something to stoke that fire of curiosity, while my son was able to be stoked in...other ways.”

“Shut up!” Ben’s voice cracks. She can hear the sob stuck in his throat. “Shut. Up.”

“Oh ho ho!” Snoke throws his head back and chuckles, his body shaking with the effort. “You thought it was love? Providence bringing the two of you together as divinely ordained soulmates?”

He takes a step closer and presses his hand down on Rey’s shoulder, forcing her to her knees. She can’t feel Ben anymore, her back cold even through the stifling heat of her clothing. Slowly, slowly,
Snoke runs a clammy finger against her cheek, trailing it under her chin and forcing her to look up at his sallow face.

“Ah yes. You’ll do quite well for me, won’t you?” He tilts his head and clucks his tongue as his eyes roam around the room. “And if not, well...then your robe will join the others.”

And then, only then, Rey sees the seams of his curtains, sees the obvious places where the panels have been pieced together, sees the outlines of hems, sleeves. Her stomach turns and she chokes back a gag as tears prickle in the corners of her eyes. “W-why?”

“They failed me.” He shrugs. “But I have faith that you won’t, right Kylo?”

She turns back now, hands and knees on the floor. Ben’s face is blank. His eyes are trained on Snoke, not even flicking on her for a second. “She won’t,” he repeats, his voice even. “She won’t fail you.”

“Good.” Snoke leans back against the edge of his desk, a lazy smile plastered on his face. “Good. You will get the child you’ve always wanted, and then I will finally have my trueborn heir. You see now, don’t you? There is no room for love here, no room for affection. Not when we have a job to do.”

“To further His kingdom,” Ben croaks. “Blessed be.”

“Soon Mayday will arrive, and we will be ready for them. How long do you think it will take those pathetic fools to crack? How long do you think it will take my Guardians to infiltrate their base and contact your mother?”

“Not long at all.” Ben’s voice is a pale memory of its normal strength.

“Ha.”

Ben steps forward and hoists Rey up by her arm. His gloved hand is vice like, harsh and bruising. Slowly, his fingers dig into her, urging her behind him as his eyes remain impassive.

But then there’s the slide of a drawer and the sharp, metallic *click* of a gun cocking.

“Wheels within wheels, my son. You watch them, they watch you, and the Eyes see it all.”

Rey freezes. Snoke has his gun trained on her head, his frail hand steady as Ben vibrates with anger in front of her. “It would be a pity,” Snoke croons. “To damage this vessel, long before it outlives its potential. Wouldn’t it, Kylo?”

“Get behind me Rey,” Ben commands through gritted teeth. “Get behind me.”

“Are you really willing to risk the life of your unborn child, Kylo? On what, the offhand chance that I’ll *miss*?” Snoke laughs again. “That’s foolish, even for—”

Then Ben’s arm wraps around Rey, forcing her behind him as he steps forward, into the line of fire. She lurches, unsteady, but manages to stay upright as Snoke yells and a single gunshot rings out.

Then everything goes very quiet.

“Ben?” she breathes.

She hears him take in a gulp of air and her heart stops. “BEN!”
“I’m okay.” His voice is ragged, thin and rasping and so unlike his usual low cadence. “I’m okay, we’re okay.”

His hand is still pressed into her belly, pinning her to his back. She squirms against him, her blood thundering her ears. “Let me go,” she hisses. “Let me go, I need to– I need to get out.”

“It’s fine. It’s okay, we’re okay.”

Then he releases her and slumps to the ground and for a whole, breathless second she thinks he’s dying, but then she turns around and sees him.

Him. Snoke. Slumped over on the top of his desk with blood oozing through his uniform, dribbling down his motionless legs and pooling on the floor. Shaking, Ben pockets his own gun in it’s holster under his uniform jacket and exhales slowly, one hand covering his mouth.

“You shot him,” she breathes.

“I killed him,” Ben clarifies, his voice muffled in the leather of his gloves. “I killed my father.”

Her gut twists. “You killed him for your child.” She tries to keep her voice steady.

Shoulders trembling, he pulls his hands away and stares at her with wet, earnest eyes. “No,” he corrects, and his voice sounds strong again, and determined. “I killed him for you.”

She’s speechless. He’s staring at her like she’s turned his world upside down and all she wants to do is collapse into his arms and stay there for a century or two, Snoke’s body be damned, but there’s already thundering feel heading towards them, pounding against the polished floors, fists banging on the office door.

“Commander!”

“Commander, we heard gunfire! Do you require assistance?”

“Commander, We’re coming in!”

“Stay behind me,” he commands through gritted teeth. “Close behind. I’ll kill as many as I can and try to get close to the door. Once we’re out–”

Wood splinters, then there’s more yelling and the sharp crack of gunfire. It’s too late for plans, too late to cower and duck so Rey reaches around Ben’s thigh and closes her fingers around the filigreed handle of his silver knife, then tugs it free. The heft of it in her palm feels right, filling her with an energy she hasn’t felt in months, so when a green uniformed soldier manages to dart past Ben’s reach, it takes her less than a second to leap forward and drive the blade into the junction of his neck and shoulder.

It doesn’t go in all the way, but his scream of rage and pain distracts him long enough for her to yank the knife free and drive it into his belly. His eyes fly open, and the sound he makes–

She’s never going to forget the sound he makes.

Vaguely, she’s aware of Ben grabbing her by the arm, dragging her across the room and through the broken doors. Her feet catch on the tile and she’s dripping blood on the fancy rugs, the knife still clutched in her trembling hand. He doesn’t stop for air until they’re outside, and even then it’s only for a moment, just to spin her around and touch her face, her shoulders, her swollen belly, dark eyes checking to make sure she’s okay.
“There’s more coming. I heard them call for backup.”

Tires screech in front of the house, announcing the arrival of a van marked with the unblinking Eye. She screams, scrambling against him for the knife, and then there’s another wave of green, soldiers springing from the surrounding yard, from the bushes and trees where they’ve been waiting, and all she can see is green, green, green, with no way to escape.

Ben’s pulling her towards the van. A fresh rush of adrenaline surges through her veins and she yanks herself back, out of his grasp.

“What are you doing?” he growls. “I’m trying to—”

Three more vans pull up in front of the house. The door to the first rolls open, and Finn tumbles out, arms outstretched. “Rey!”

“Finn!” she shrieks, then the other vans open and no, it’s more green uniformed Guardians, guns raised. The first van, Finn’s van, lurches forward, mowing over one of them, and he screams, “REY, COME ON!”

There’s gunshots in the air, warning shots, the soldiers still hesitant to take down a pregnant Handmaid for fear of punishment. Ben pushes her towards Finn, then turns away, face grim, and Rey’s stomach drops.

“BEN!”

She laces her fingers into his bloodstained coat. “Ben, don’t you dare.”

He bites his lip, and gives her one last, fleeting smile. “I love you.”

Her breath catches in her throat. “I know.”

She hears a horn tapping impatiently. There’s hands, Finn’s hands, looping under her armpits, pulling her towards freedom, but all she can see is Ben, Ben, Ben. Ben gripping a man’s neck in his hand, Ben tripping a Guardian and kicking him over and over, Ben screaming as another soldier hits him in the back of the head with the butt of his gun. All she can see it him struggling against a sea of green bodies as the van door rolls shut, as soft voices and firm hands attempt to calm her, but it’s no use. Her chest feels raw and ripped open, stabbed through with the image of Ben’s battered body on the ground, pummelled and kicked by an endless sea of forest green boots.

The last thing she sees is his dark eyes, determined and wild, before a rough burlap sack is pulled over his head and he’s dragged, struggling and flailing, back into Snoke’s house.

She muffles a scream into her clenched fingers. Finn’s hand reaches back to grip her shoulder, to hold her steady as the van’s tires squeal down the highway. She feels nauseated and lightheaded, and she can’t tear her eyes away from the window even though they’ve already flown past the city limits.

A woman, Ofhux, kneels before her. With steady hands, she cups Rey’s cheeks and smiles at her reassuringly. “It’s okay, Rey. You’re safe with us. You can relax.”

But she can’t. She can’t because suddenly she feels a sharp pinch then there’s liquid everywhere, soaking her underwear, her gown, sliding down her legs onto the bare metal floor of the van. She hears Ofhux screaming, then Finn’s scrambling out of his seat, tugging off his jacket and shoving it under Rey’s legs.

“Is it time?” he pants. “Is the baby coming?”
She has no idea. There’s no movement in her belly, save for the steady trickle of fluid down her legs, and she can’t feel any pain, not yet. She’s not sure what she’s supposed to be feeling; all of her knowledge of childbirth has been gleaned from Ben’s physiology textbooks, and it’s not like she memorized them.

They hit a bump and another wave of liquid gushes out of her. For a moment she’s horrified that she’s peeing, but there’s too much and only a faint sensation of release, coupled with a cloying, briney smell that she’s noticed in her underwear over the past month or so.

“I think it’s coming,” she pants.

Ofhux grips her shoulders, face grim but determined. “Any pain yet?”

Rey shakes her head. The other woman sighs. “That’s good, for now. There will be pain, but I swear to you I’m not leaving your side until this baby is out. Do you understand?”

Rey nods. “Please,” she gasps. “What should I call you?”

Ofhux pauses, startled. Her lips twist into a tiny smile. “Rose. My name is Rose.”

“Okay, okay Rose.” Panting, Rey grins. “You can call me Rey.”

Then she feels the sensation of her back being ripped in two, and everything descends into a hazy grey fog of pain

Six Months Later

There’s elk on the lawn again.

Rey can hear a grumble from the other room as Luke hoists himself up from the couch. “Luke, just leave them be!” she calls to the older man, but he’s already grabbed his rifle from the pegs above the door.

“You know I can’t do that, Rey, or else we’ll have no apples on the tree next year, or blossoms for the bees. These elk just love to chew off the little tender tips of the branches. Besides, it’s just a couple of warning shots.”

She pokes her head through the archway. “It better be, or else we’re going to be eating only elk for the next month and a half.”

He smirks, blue eyes twinkling in the sunlight. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Have you checked on the bees recently?” she muses, more as a distraction than anything. “Do you need me to make them some more syrup?”

“The bees are fine,” Luke sighs. “And the elk will be too, I promise.”

“Good.”
He lets out a snort then walks outside, bringing in a quick gust of frigid air in his wake. She shivers and retreats back into the kitchen, where Leia is stirring a pot of soup with one hand while cradling a squirming bundle against her hip.

“Here, I can take her back.” Rey offers her outstretched arms, into which Leia deposits the baby.

“Whew,” she groans. “I can’t be doing that much longer. She’s getting big.”

“She’s taking after her father,” Rey murmurs, clutching her tight. “Big and strong.”

“Ben was actually quite a small thing when he was born.” Leia looks at the soup, suddenly wistful. “He was slight up until the last moment I saw him. Tall, yes, but slim. You said he’s quite broad now?”

She flashes Rey a mournful grimace. It’s an awkward tension between them, the way she fishes for bites of information on the child she left behind, cognizant but unapologetic about Rey’s obvious discomfort. “Yes he is, was, quite broad. From his time in the military I believe. Broader than Finn, and taller too.”

“Tall like Han.” Leia hums. “We’ve received word of another van on its way. The refugees will be arriving any moment now.” She pauses, her dark eyes fixed on Rey. “Do you think… it’s possible?”

“No, I don’t.” It’s harsh, she knows, but it would be harsher still to lead her on. “We’ve been over this. I saw them take him. There was at least twenty of them. There’s no way—”

“But he was always such a fighter!”

“And he did fight, but not for himself.” Rey buries her nose into the inky blacks wisps on her daughter’s head and inhales the warm scent of new baby. “I don’t know if he even would fight for himself after—after all that he’d done.”

Leia extends a finger to the baby, who grabs it with an amused squeal. “Even with so much to live for?” she muses. “I highly doubt that. Don’t you doubt that, Hope?”

Hope responds with a lighthearted babble as she squeezes her grandmother’s finger in her fist. Rey frowns. “Hope is barely six months old. She’ll learn to be less optimistic.”

“Hope being less optimistic. It seems wrong, for some reason.” Leia gently tugs her finger free then plants a kiss on the baby’s cheek.

The soup lets out an angry hiss from the stove, drawing Leia’s attention away from her granddaughter and back on lunch. Rey welcomes the reprieve and heads back to the living room, hugging Hope to her chest.

It’s been over half a year. Half a year since she last saw Ben’s broken stare disappear behind a burlap sack. Half a year since she cried herself unconscious in the back of a van, cradled in Rose’s arms and soaked in her own amniotic fluid. Half a year since she laboured and pushed for hours until she delivered her daughter on the Canadian border.

It’s been half a year but it seems like another lifetime ago.

The couch sags under the weight of her and Hope, who has mercifully decided to burrow into her sweater and doze. Rey leans her head back into the cushions and sighs. Half a year has been enough time for her to process a few things, to work through some of the baggage from her experiences. Talking to the other refugees has helped a bit; she’s connected with most of the other evacuated
Handmaids, who have each brought with them unique stories that resonate along with hers. Some of them were beaten, some were berated, and some, like Rey, have trauma of a different kind.

She...she didn’t love him. She doesn’t—but she doesn’t hate him either, not any more. Yet the pain she’s felt ever since she saw him dragged away can’t be explained as anything other than a broken heart. Every day she wakes up and sees him in Hope’s face, and her mourning starts anew.

Leia can’t be convinced. After hearing stories about him, from Finn, Rose, and mostly Rey, she thinks of him now as some sort of avenging hero, rising from the ashes of his past to destroy the establishment. Rey’s convinced she’s delusional, or in denial as a way to keep herself going, keep fighting the fight for another day. Already she and Luke have travelled to Ottawa countless times to lobby the Canadian government, and soon she’s going to fly overseas, to meet with a council of international leaders. Leia’s a spitfire for sure, and with her on Mayday’s side, there’s no way Gilead won’t crumble.

Rey shifts her arms, which causes Hope to stir and wake from her sleep. Cursing under her breath, Rey pats her back and tries to coax her back down, but it’s no use; Hope pops up, fresh as a daisy, eyes wide open and fixed on the snowstorm outside. Leia says Ben was like that too as a baby, eyes open, alert and energetic until he would suddenly pass out from exhaustion.

“Gah!” Lunging forward, Hope runs her sticky fingers against the window, leaving a trail of five smears across the glass. Rey sighs and squeezes her tightly.

The snow is getting thicker, swirling above the evergreen trees. Rey rests her head against the window and wonders whether the getaway van has snow tires. She wonders about a lot of things, gaze flicking from rock to bush to treetop, until she rests on Hope’s dark brown eyes.

“Maybe he is out there,” she whispers, quiet enough that only the two of them can hear it. “And if he is, I’ll bet he’ll come for you.” She drops a kiss on her daughter’s delicate black curls. “He’ll come for both of us.”

Surrounded by the warmth of the fire and the glittering flakes outside, she settles her eyes on the road beyond the hillside, and waits.

Chapter End Notes

thank you to everyone who has come along with me on this journey.

It's been almost 2 (!!!) years since I started this fic, and it's finally done! I hope you've enjoyed reading. Please don't kill me for the kind of ambiguous ending :, but it's the only ending that really felt right for me.

Feel free to boop me on twitter @saint_heretical with questions, comments, or just to chat!!

edit: I have removed the "kinda HEA" tag from the fic at a reader's request. This was not meant as a bait and switch; I realize that my interpretation of what constitutes a happy ending isn't universal, and I don't want to mislead people.

For those who want more closure, I'm totally willing to write a kind of apocryphal one-shot that ties everything up and ends on a happier note.
Please *drop by the archive and comment* to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!